

Reflections on Bach's "Christmas Oratorio"

by John Harbison

Composer John Harbison, whose ties to Boston's cultural and educational communities are longstanding, celebrates his 80th birthday on December 20, 2018. To mark this birthday, the BSO will perform his Symphony No. 2 on January 10, 11, and 12 at Symphony Hall, and the Boston Symphony Chamber Players perform music of Harbison and J.S. Bach on Sunday afternoon, January 13, at Jordan Hall. The author of a new book entitled "What Do We Make of Bach?—Portraits, Essays, Notes," Mr. Harbison here offers thoughts on Bach's "Christmas Oratorio."

Andris Nelsons' 2018 performances of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* are the Boston Symphony's first since 1950, when Charles Munch was the orchestra's music director. Munch may have been the last BSO conductor for whom Bach's music remained a natural and substantial part of any season. In the 1950s the influence of Historically Informed Practice (HIP) was beginning to be felt. Large orchestras and their conductors began to draw away from 18th-century repertoire, feeling themselves too large, too unschooled in stylistic issues.

For Charles Munch, Bach was life-blood. I remember hearing his generous, spacious performance of Cantata 4, his monumental reading of the double-chorus, single-movement Cantata 50. Arriving at Tanglewood as a Fellow in 1958, opening night in the Theatre-Concert Hall, there was Munch's own transcription for string orchestra of Bach's complete *Art of Fugue*!

This was a weird and glorious experience, a two-hour journey through Bach's fugue cycle that seemed a stream of sublime, often very unusual harmony, seldom articulated as to line or sectional contrast. In Charles Munch's ear it became a kind of late Fauré piece. It was a devotional reading, Bach through a fascinating Gallic prism, an embodiment of Munch's passion and Bach's durability.

Are we perhaps returning to a time when Bach, Handel, and Haydn might edge back toward their earlier place in the big orchestra world, to be heard again by an audience that seldom crosses over to the specialist early music domain? In Germany, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* is the seasonal equivalent to the English-speaking world's *Messiah*. Every locale of even modest size produces it, the audience seems to be virtually humming along. Presented as an evening, all six cantatas, it is a challenging form. In fact it is not really a form: each of the six cantatas has its own piece of the story and its own sound, although I, III, and VI—however nuanced their D major trumpet-drum celebrations—can seem close cousins on first hearing.

Having first experienced them one a week, I feel fortunate to retain distinct, independent impressions of the pastoral, truly angelic Cantata II, the tonally-fresh horn-colored world of IV, the adrenaline shot of V, smallest orchestration and hottest music dealing with the harshest drama in the story.

In addition to the unusual experience of a non-form (a drama in six acts), the listener is privileged to be hearing the only extended example of the late Bach chorale manner. His cantata-oratorio period is behind him, only one other choral enterprise in his final fifteen years absorbed his attention: the completion of the B minor Mass with the addition of the *Et incarnatus* and parts of the *Confiteor*.

In the *Christmas Oratorio* we notice an especially adventurous approach to the chorales, always a site of word-specific invention, here even more detailed and emotionally charged. There is also a theatrical largeness to the opening choruses, with elaborated "B" sections, and vast ceremonial exchanges between the chorus and orchestra, on a scale rare in cantatas.

A fascinating behind-the-scenes possibility lurks in the genesis of this piece, a premise which a real Bach scholar would not present as baldly here.

Bach and his librettist, Picander (C.F. Henrici), brought forth the *St. Matthew Passion* very early in their partnership (1727). By the early 1730s they were working often on commissions for secular celebrations—princely birthdays, weddings. It seems plausible, examining the beautifully paired texts, that these pieces could have been conceived in parallel with a much bigger project, the *Christmas Oratorio*. The secular pieces "subsidized" an important missing piece in Bach's music for the church calendar. Double-texting of choruses and arias turns out to fit well—for example, birth music for a prince can be reworked as sacred nativity music. In every case the "later" (more likely simultaneous) version is deeper and more telling.

An interesting thing about this hypothesis: it seems to answer one of the most frequently asked questions about Bach. Was he merely vocationally a church composer, or did he aspire to—and cherish—that calling? In the 1730s we find him plotting, planning, preparing, making time and occasion for his last sacred vocal work, long after his obligations to his church job had been fulfilled.

John Harbison (November 2018)

Bach's "Christmas Oratorio" Then and Now

by Christoph Wolff

Bach scholar Christoph Wolff is Adams University Professor Emeritus at Harvard University and Artistic Advisor to the BSO/GHO Alliance.

Bach's "Christmas Oratorio" in the Context of Leipzig's Musical History

This week's performances of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* celebrate the partnership of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Gewandhausorchester by commemorating, on the occasion of the Leipzig orchestra's 275th anniversary, its initial phase. Founded in 1743 under the name "*Großes Concert*" ("Grand Concerts") by a group of businessmen, the new concert enterprise started under the musical directorship of Johann Friedrich Doles, a former Bach student and later his second successor as Thomascantor. It essentially filled the void of the weekly secular concert series of Bach's "Collegium Musicum" that had begun in 1729 and ended in 1741 with the death of its host, the café-tier Zimmermann. Under Bach as music director of the St. Nicholas and St. Thomas churches (the Nikolaikirche and the Thomaskirche), the Collegium series stayed away from religious music. However, the *Großes Concert* saw no conflict of interest in performing sacred works and, by doing so, following the model of the Concert Spirituel in Paris, added a new facet to an emerging bourgeois music culture in Germany.

As the Leipzig town chronicler reported, on Monday of Holy Week 1748 the *Großes Concert* presented a Passion oratorio by Johann Adolf Hasse at the Three Swans Inn, its permanent home before moving in 1781 to the Garment House (Gewandhaus). It was attended by an audience of more than 300 and the concert's success prompted similar oratorio performances at the beginning of Holy Week in subsequent years. The 1748 oratorio performance, however, may not have been the very first, because in 1746 or 1747 George Frideric Handel's *Brookes-Passion* was presented in Leipzig under Bach's direction. The score Bach himself had copied out does not show any signs of a liturgical performance on Good Friday at the vespers service of the Leipzig main churches; therefore, it may well have been presented under the auspices of the *Großes Concert*. Be that as it may, in the absence of further documentation, the location of the Handel performance remains hypothetical, but there is no question that none other than Bach was responsible for awakening the appetite for oratorio performances in Leipzig. By the end of his first year as Thomascantor, he had managed to turn the Good Friday vespers of the Leipzig main churches into the musical pinnacle of the year, by offering modern Passion oratorios of unprecedented scale—first with his *St. John* Passion of 1724, topping that with the double-choir *St. Matthew* Passion of 1727, and then in 1731 by adding the (lost) *St. Mark* Passion.

After essentially completing the repertoire of church cantatas, Bach focused in the 1730s primarily on large-scale sacred works. But limited by the 20-30 minutes allotted for cantatas in the liturgy of regular Sunday and feast day worship services, he could not accommodate a large piece except by subdividing it into smaller units. He indeed did so with the *Christmas Oratorio* of 1734/35 by spreading its six parts over the twelve-day Christmas season. In 1738, he then added two shorter sister oratorios for Easter and Ascension Day by daring to overstretch the liturgical boundaries, thus completing an oratorio trilogy for the three jubilant church festivals. Together with the three Passion oratorios, they commemorate the major stations of the life of the biblical Jesus—birth, suffering and death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven as articulated by the Christian creed. There is no precedent for such a coherent musical scheme covering the four dominant Christological feast days. Bach's cyclical embedding, as it were, of the three Passions by three complementary oratorios genuinely exposed his personal idea which, by a strange coincidence, anticipated Handel's *Messiah* of 1741/42 as a non-liturgical musical representation of the life of Jesus Christ in a single oratorio on a scriptural text.

The "Christmas Oratorio" Viewed as a Whole

Among Bach's large-scale vocal works, the six-part *Christmas Oratorio* presents a special case that reveals many of the composer's priorities reflected in his oratorio-style works. First of all, by its structural reliance on a continuous biblical narrative that accords with the contemporaneous definition of oratorio as "sacred opera," it underscores the conceptual departure from the regular church cantata that functions as an exegetical musical sermon about a scriptural text. Second, the various borrowings from secular works for celebratory occasions hint at Bach's close collaboration with his librettist and suggest a premeditated re-use of poetic and musical ideas with the goal of finding a permanent home of the music in the sacred repertoire. Hence, textual and musical allusions as they occur, for instance, in the cradle song "Schlafe, mein Liebster" ("Sleep, my beloved") of both the secular birthday cantata and the *Christmas Oratorio*, could easily be transferred from the birthday of an electoral prince to that of the Christ Child. Finally, although the performance of the work took place over six feast-days of the Christmas period and alternated between the two main churches in Leipzig, the *Christmas Oratorio* was deliberately conceived as a self-contained whole. Salient features of the work's overarching design include the key order of the six parts (D major, G major, D major, F major, A major, D major) and identical *tutti* scorings with trumpets in the D major home-key parts; different instrumental colors for the dominant and subdominant keys, and a surprise flat-key with F-horns in place of trumpets for New Year's Day. Moreover, the value Bach attached to the musical architecture and the

liturgical embedding of the work is reflected in the linking of the oratorio's first and last parts, and in rounding off the whole by using one and the same melody for the first and last chorales (nos. 5 and 64, respectively)—a melody that also belongs to a prominent Lenten hymn and thereby foreshadows the Good Friday Passion.

Up to the present, the *Christmas Oratorio* is still rarely performed complete. Yet only an unabridged presentation of all six parts—like this week's performances in Symphony Hall—makes it possible fully to realize how ingeniously the composer managed to create a work of such gripping intensity, with a structure so remarkably unified, despite considerable odds: a liturgical calendar and local conventions dictating partition and performance at alternating locations. It almost seems as if Bach had meant to override given conditions and anticipate a non-liturgical concert performance. In this sense, and as he observed the rise of the *Großes Concert* late in his lifetime, the trend of bringing religious music also to the concert hall would hardly have run against his interests.

Christoph Wolff

Johann Sebastian Bach

“Weihnachts-Oratorium” (“Christmas Oratorio”), BWV 248

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH was born in Eisenach, Thuringia, in central Germany, on March 21, 1685, and died in Leipzig on July 28, 1750. He composed and compiled the “Christmas Oratorio” in 1734 for performance in Leipzig during that year's Christmas season, and its six parts, with Bach himself conducting, were performed over the course of twelve days: Christmas Day 1734 (a Saturday); the day after Christmas, and two days after Christmas; New Year's Day 1735; the Sunday after New Year's (January 2); and the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6). Parts I, II, IV, and VI were performed in both the Thomaskirche (in the morning service) and the Nikolaikirche (afternoon); parts III and V were only performed at the Nikolaikirche. This week's performances are the first by the Boston Symphony Orchestra of the complete work. (A full BSO performance history appears at the end of this note.)

THE SCORING OF THE “CHRISTMAS ORATORIO” CALLS FOR soprano, alto, tenor, and bass vocal soloists, four-part mixed chorus (soprano, alto, tenor, bass), and orchestra. The instrumental ensemble is slightly different for each cantata, though the strings and the continuo group—organ, bassoon, and cello—are constants. In addition to the strings and continuo, Part I requires two flutes, two oboes, two oboes d'amore, three trumpets, and timpani; Part II, two flutes, two oboes d'amore, and two oboes da caccia; Part III, two flutes, two oboes, two oboes d'amore, three trumpets, and timpani; Part IV, two oboes and two horns; Part V, two oboes d'amore; Part VI, two oboes, two oboes d'amore, three trumpets, and timpani.

J.S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* is a cycle of six musically self-contained cantatas, each taking for its subject a scene from the New Testament Gospel of St. Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus Christ. The six parts, as laid out by Bach and his unknown librettist (possibly his longtime collaborator Picander), are: The Birth of Jesus; Annunciation to the Shepherds; Adoration of the Shepherds; Circumcision and Naming of Jesus; Journey of the Magi; and Adoration of the Magi. Each cantata employs a similar pattern—a tone-setting introductory movement is followed by the Evangelist's story-telling recitative, interspersed with poetic commentary from soloists or chorus. Five of the six introductory movements are for chorus and orchestra; the second cantata begins with a Sinfonia for the orchestra alone. This general, flexible template of movements sufficed for most of Bach's large output of cantatas, the bulk of which he wrote in his first decade in Leipzig.

Bach had arrived in the city in May 1723 following six years of service in Cöthen, and lived in Leipzig until his death in July 1750. In Cöthen, in the service of the music-loving Prince Leopold, he amassed an astonishing catalog of instrumental masterpieces, among them the six *Brandenburg* Concertos, the works for unaccompanied cello and unaccompanied violin, and the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The Leipzig position, Thomaskantor and Music Director of Leipzig, gave him oversight over the musical activities of the city's four principal churches, the Thomaskirche, Nikolaikirche, Neukirche, and Petrikerche, as well as responsibility for the tutelage of the boys at the Thomasschule, the boarding school of St. Thomas Church.

Bach's compositional activities in Leipzig focused on music for Sunday services, church feast days and special services, and other special occasions, such as weddings and funerals—“a bold program of church music,” Bach scholar Christoph Wolff notes, that in its “richness of ideas, forms, and sonorities...was unprecedented for Leipzig (or anywhere else, for that matter).” The amount of music that he produced in this position is staggering, especially in the first few years. After his first two years he had assembled two nearly complete church-year cycles of cantatas, each comprising more than sixty large-scale works. He completed two more cycles by 1729, and yet a fifth by the 1740s. The term cantata in Bach's day broadly referred to a sectional narrative work for voice or voices and ensemble, with or without chorus. The subject matter of the text could be either religious or secular; secular cantatas were typically composed for such occasions as birthdays of the nobility. Bach's preoccupation and experience with the cantata form is the foundation for the *Christmas Oratorio*.

That Bach was an encyclopedic composer is apparent over the entire course of his career. Excepting opera, he made a point of exploring the far reaches of possibility in every genre of music he encountered. Smaller-scale examples of this approach can be seen in his comprehensive survey of the concerto grosso style in his *Brandenburg Concertos* (some of which go well beyond expectations for the genre). In his sonatas and partitas for solo violin and suites for unaccompanied cello, he plumbed the depths of string instrument writing as well as the limits of virtual counterpoint (that is, creating the illusion of multiple contrapuntal voices). Several different projects, including the *Clavier-Übung* (which includes the *Goldberg Variations* and the *Italian Concerto*) and *Well-Tempered Clavier*, develop contrapuntal keyboard writing to its highest pinnacle.

Likewise, in his cantatas, Bach developed the form in all dimensions. For his first years in Leipzig, Bach's deliberate concentration on the church cantata gave him little opportunity for much else, but within the restrictions of the church service (which required a typical duration for each cantata of between twenty and twenty-five minutes) he explored a variety of approaches. For example, in his second year in Leipzig he embarked on a cycle of chorale cantatas, in which the textual and musical content of the piece is based on a single Lutheran hymn, such as Martin Luther's *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"), which is the basis for Cantata No. 80. Among the best-known of Bach's chorale cantatas is No. 140, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* (known in English as "Sleepers, Awake"). All cantatas are vocal works, but Bach's include those with and without chorus; those for a single solo voice, and those with multiple solo voices. Many begin with a chorale introduction, but others open with an instrumental sinfonia; in some cases this was a concerto-like movement for solo instrument and ensemble. This great variety had the benefit of maintaining the interest of both Bach's constituency (performers and congregation), and the composer himself.

Breaks in performances of cantatas during the church year, during the Lenten season before Easter and during Advent, before Christmas, allowed Bach and his musicians to prepare the special music that was called for during and around these most important Christian festivals. For Easter 1724, Bach wrote the first of his large-scale "Passion oratorios," the *St. John* Passion, and during Easter week in 1727 the even bigger, double-chorus *St. Matthew* Passion was introduced. A third oratorio Passion, based on the Gospel of Mark, is lost, but the text survives. (A list of works published after Bach's death notes two further Passion settings, now lost or perhaps listed in error.) The term oratorio designates a large-scale concert work for voices and orchestra with a dramatic narrative, usually based on a religious subject. In its broad musical and narrative outlines, the oratorio corresponded to opera, but lacked staging and sets, and its character roles for the solo singers are usually far less defined. (The biggest exception is the role of the Evangelist, narrator in the Passions as well as the *Christmas Oratorio*.)

In contrast with his contemporary George Frideric Handel, whose *Messiah* is the most famous oratorio, Bach wrote very few such works: in addition to the Passions (for which Bach didn't use the term oratorio), there are only the *Christmas Oratorio*, the *Easter Oratorio*, and the *Ascension Oratorio*. Of these, the *Christmas Oratorio* is by far the most ambitious.

Much of the music of the *Christmas Oratorio* originated in earlier Bach cantatas on secular subjects. The two main extant sources were the 1733 cantatas nos. 213, *Laßt uns sorgen, laßt uns wachen* ("Let us take care, let us watch"), aka *Hercules at the Crossroads*, and 214, *Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten!* ("Resound, drums! Ring out, trumpets!"). Both were composed in honor of members of the Saxon royal family, No. 213 for the birthday of Crown Prince Friedrich Christian, and No. 214 for the birthday of his mother, Maria Josepha, Electress of Saxony. (Another major source, the basis for Part VI, is thought to be the lost church cantata BWV248a.) This re-use of earlier works was a common practice for Bach, as it was for many composers of the era, but as John Harbison suggests in his comments on the *Christmas Oratorio*, the secular cantatas may have been planned from their beginnings as the oratorio's foundation.

As mentioned above, the oratorio was planned for and first performed during the Christmas season of 1734-35, from Christmas Day through Epiphany, twelve days later. Each cantata is a multi-movement work consisting of several kinds of pieces. The storytelling part of each is delivered in recitative by a tenor in the role of Evangelist, from the Gospel of Luke. This is interspersed with solo vocal and choral commentary, much of the text of which was written for the purpose. Chorale movements from the Lutheran tradition, which would have been well known to Bach's congregations, are found throughout. For example, the fifth movement of the opening cantata is the 17th-century hymn "Wie soll dich empfangen," also used in the *St. Matthew* Passion. For each part, the opening movement establishes the general tenor of the cantata. Five of the six opening movements are chorales, introducing the scene with both text and music. In keeping with its subject matter, the introduction to the second cantata, Annunciation to the Shepherds, is an instrumental Sinfonia known as the "Pastorale," one of Bach's most familiar orchestral movements.

Each of the six parts calls for a different complement of instruments, assuring an acoustic distinction among the six parts. In the cantata for Christmas Day, which tells of Mary and Joseph's arrival in Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus,

Bach stocks his ensemble with the celebratory sound of trumpets and timpani, a sound that introduces the cycle as a whole. In the second cantata, a pair of oboes da caccia (a precursor of the English horn) evokes the shepherd's pastoral world. Horns are only found in the fourth cantata; in the fifth, only a pair of oboes is added to strings and continuo. Bach uses specific instruments to accompany arias throughout the cantata to create nuances of atmosphere and mood.

The text will be your guide through these six scenes from the narrative of Christ's birth.

Robert Kirzinger

Composer/annotator ROBERT KIRZINGER is the BSO's Associate Director of Program Publications.

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE OF MUSIC FROM BACH'S "CHRISTMAS ORATORIO"—

Parts I and II of the piece—was given by the Handel & Haydn Society at the Music Hall in Boston on May 17, 1877, Carl Zerrahn conducting, with soloists Emma Thursby, Annie Louise Cary, and William J. and John F. Winch, and organist B.J. Lang.

THESE ARE THE BSO'S FIRST COMPLETE PERFORMANCES OF BACH'S "CHRISTMAS

ORATORIO," though Charles Munch led the orchestra, vocal soloists Marguerite Willauer, Janice Moudry, William Hess, and James Pease, and an ad hoc chorus prepared by Arthur Fiedler in performances of cantatas I-IV and VI during the Christmas season of 1950. Wilhelm Gericke led the first and second cantatas with the BSO, soloists Emma Juch, Emily Winant, William J. Winch, and Franz Remmert, and a "chorus of three hundred" in a concert commemorating the 200th anniversary of Bach's birth on March 21, 1885. Gericke led the Cantata II alto aria "Schlafe, mein Liebster," featuring soloist Emily Winant, once; the Sinfonia from that cantata figured many times in the BSO programs of conductors Gericke, Arthur Nikisch, Emil Paur, Max Fiedler, Karl Muck, and Ernst Schmidt between 1884 and 1915, returning to the repertoire under guest conductors Wheeler Beckett in 1944 in Boston and Victor de Sabata in 1950 at Tanglewood. Munch also conducted this single movement during the Christmas season on many occasions between 1952 and 1960 (the most recent BSO performances of any music from the piece), pairing it in December 1955 with the Cantata II concluding chorale, "Wir singen dir in deinem Heer."

J.S. BACH "Christmas Oratorio," BWV 248

English translation by Pamela Dellal

Part I: Cantata for the First Day of Christmas

"Jauchzet, frohlocket, auf, preiset die Tage"

Chorus

Celebrate, rejoice, rise up and praise these days,
glorify what the Highest has done today!
Abandon despair, banish laments,
sound forth full of delight and happiness!
Serve the Highest with glorious choruses,
let us honor the name of the Supreme Ruler!

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

It came to pass at that time, however, that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be appraised. And everyone went to be appraised, each to his own city. So Joseph also went out of Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into the Jewish territory to the city of David, which was called Bethlehem; since he was of the house and race of David; so that he might be appraised with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was pregnant. And while they were there, the time came for her to deliver.

Recitative (Alto)

Now my dearest Bridegroom,
now the hero from David's branch,
for the comfort, for the salvation of the earth,
will be born at last.
Now the Star out of Jacob will shine,
its light already breaks forth.
Arise, Zion, and give up your weeping now,

your happiness rises high above you!

Aria (Alto)

Prepare yourself, Zion, with tender efforts,
to behold your lovely one, your beloved,
near you soon!
Your cheeks
must now glow much more radiantly,
hurry to love the Bridegroom with passion!

Chorale

How shall I embrace You,
and how encounter You?
O desire of the whole world,
O adornment of my soul!
O Jesus, Jesus, place
the torch near me Yourself,
so that what gives You pleasure
be known and familiar to me!

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

And she bore her first son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, since there was no other room in the inn.

Chorale (*Soprano chorus*) and Recitative (Bass)

He came to earth poor,
Who can rightly exalt this love,
that our Savior harbors for us?
So that He might have sympathy for us,
Indeed, who could possibly have predicted
how the sorrow of humanity moved Him?
And make us rich in heaven,
The Son of the Highest came into the world,
since its salvation pleased Him so much,
and like His dear angels.
thus He Himself will be born a human.
Kyrie eleison!

Aria (Bass)

Great Lord, o powerful King,
dearest Savior, o how little
you care about the glories of the earth!
He who sustains the entire world,
who created its magnificence and beauty,
must sleep in a harsh manger.

Chorale

Ah, my heart's beloved little Jesus,
make Yourself a pure, soft little bed
within my heart's chamber in which to rest,
so that I never forget You!

Part II: Cantata for the Second Day of Christmas

“Und es waren Hirten in derselben Gegend”

10. Sinfonia

11. Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

And there were shepherds in the same region in the fields near the sheepfolds, who guarded their flock at night. And behold, the angel of the Lord approached them, and the brilliance of the Lord shone around them and they were very afraid.

Chorale

Break forth, o lovely light of morning,
and let heaven dawn!
You shepherd-folk, do not fear,
for the angel tells you
that this weak little boy
shall be our comfort and joy,
compelling Satan as well
and bringing peace at last!

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor], Angel [Soprano])

And the angel said to them:

—Do not be afraid; behold, I proclaim great joy for you, which will occur for all people. For today the Savior is born for you, which is Christ, the Lord, in the city of David.—

Recitative (Bass)

What God promised to Abraham,
now, fulfilled, He has had announced
to the group of shepherds.
A shepherd, then, first of all,
had experience of God.
And now, also, a shepherd is first of all
to know the fulfillment
of what once was promised.

Aria (Tenor)

Happy shepherds, hurry, ah hurry,
before you delay too long,
hurry to see the lovely Child!
Go, this joy is so exquisite,
seek to achieve this loveliness,
go and delight heart and senses!

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

And you will have this as a sign: you will find the Child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

Chorale

Look there, there He lies in a dark stall,
whose majesty encompasses everything!
Where once an ox searched for food,
now the Child of the Virgin rests.

Recitative (Bass)

Then go there, you shepherds, go,
so that you see the miracle:
and when you find the Son of the Highest
lying in a harsh manger,
then sing to Him by His cradle
in a sweet tone
and with full chorus
this lullaby!

Aria (Alto)

Sleep, my beloved, enjoy Your rest,

and awaken after it for all the fortunate!
Let your heart delight,
experience the joy
that rejoices our hearts!

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

And immediately, with the angel, there was a throng of the heavenly hosts, who praised God and said:

Chorus (The Angels)

Glory be to God in the highest and peace on earth and a happy occurrence for humanity.

Recitative (Bass)

Thus rightly, you angels, rejoice and sing,
that it works out so beautifully for us today!
Up then! We play along with you;
we can celebrate just as you do.

Chorale

We sing to You in Your host
with all our might praise, glory and honor,
since You, o long-awaited guest,
from now on have become present.

Part III: Cantata for the Third Day of Christmas

“Herrscher des Himmels, erhöre das Lallen”

Chorus

Ruler of Heaven, hear the murmur,
let the dull songs be pleasing to You,
when Your Zion exalts You with psalms!
Hear the delightful praises of our hearts,
when we acknowledge our present awe of You,
since our pilgrimage has been confirmed!

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

And when the angels went away from them towards heaven, the shepherds said to one another:

Chorus

Let us go now towards Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened there, which the Lord has announced to us.

Recitative (Bass)

He has comforted His people,
He has rescued His Israel,
sending help out of Zion
and ending our sorrow.
Look, shepherds, He has done this;
go, this is what awaits you!

Chorale

All this He has done for us,
to indicate His great love;
for this all Christianity rejoices
and thanks Him for it in eternity.
Kyrie eleison!

Aria (Duet: Soprano and Bass)

Lord, your compassion, your mercy
comforts us and makes us free.

Your gracious favor and love,
Your miraculous doings
make Your fatherly devotion
renewed again.

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

And they came hastily and found both Mary and Joseph, along with the child lying in the manger. When they had seen it, however, they spread the word around, that had been spoken about this child. And everyone to whom it came marveled at the sayings that the shepherds had told them. Mary however kept all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Aria (Alto)

Enclose, my heart, these blessed miracles
fast within your faith!
Let these wonders, these divine works,
forever be the reinforcement
of your weak faith!

Recitative (Alto)

Yes, yes, my heart shall cherish this,
what it has experienced
at this glorious time for its blessedness
as a sure revelation.

Chorale

I will cherish You assiduously,
I will
live for You here,
to You will I depart,
with You, at last, I will float
full of joy,
endlessly,
there in the other life.

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

And the shepherds went back again, praising and glorifying God for everything that they had seen and heard, as it had been spoken to them.

Chorus

Meanwhile, be happy,
for your salvation
is born here a God and also a person,
He, who is
the Lord and Christ
in David's city, chosen out of many.

[Repeat of opening chorus]

Ruler of Heaven, hear the murmur,
let the dull songs be pleasing to You,
when Your Zion exalts You with psalms!
Hear the delightful praises of our hearts,
when we acknowledge our present awe of You,
since our pilgrimage has been confirmed!

INTERMISSION

Part IV: Cantata for New Year's Day

“Fallt mit Danken, fallt mit Loben”

Chorus

With gratitude, with praise,
fall before the Almighty's throne of grace!
God's Son
desires to become
the Savior and Redeemer of the world,
God's Son
suppresses the rage and fury of the enemy.

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

And when eight days had passed, when the child would be circumcised, He was given the name of Jesus, which was proposed for Him by the angel, while He was still confined in His mother's body.

Recitative and Arioso (Bass, *Soprano chorale*)

Emmanuel, o sweet word!
My Jesus is named my treasure,
my Jesus is named my life.
My Jesus has given Himself to me,
my Jesus shall, from now on,
hover before my eyes.
My Jesus is named my joy,
my Jesus refreshes heart and breast.

*Jesus, o my dearest life,
bridegroom of my soul,
Come! I will embrace You with joy,
my heart shall never leave You,
You who have given Yourself for me
on the bitter staff of the cross!
Ah! Then take me to You!*

Even in death you shall be to me
my most beloved;
in suffering, danger, and hardship
I look to You longingly.
How, then, can death pursue me with fear?
My Jesus! When I die,
I know that I will not perish.
Your name stands written within me,
which has driven out the fear of death.

Aria (Soprano, with echo chorus)

O my Savior, does your name
instill even the very tiniest seed
of that powerful terror?
No, You Yourself say no. (*No!*)
Shall I shun death now?
No, Your sweet word is there!
Or shall I rejoice?
Yes, o Savior, You Yourself say yes. (*Yes!*)

Recitative (Bass, *Soprano chorale*)

Well then, Your name alone
shall be in my heart!
*Jesus, my joy and delight,
my hope, treasure and portion,*
Thus I shall call you enchanting,
since breast and heart are enflamed with

love for You.
My redemption, adornment, and salvation,
Yet, beloved, tell me:
how shall I praise You, how thank You?
Shepherd and King, light and sun,
ah! How shall I worthily
praise You, my Jesus?

Aria (Tenor)
I will live only for Your honor,
my Savior, give me strength and courage,
so that my heart can do it eagerly!
Strengthen me
to exalt Your mercy worthily
and with gratitude!

Chorale
Jesus orders my beginning,
Jesus remains always with me,
Jesus restrains my thoughts,
let Jesus only be my delight,
let Jesus be with me in my thoughts,
Jesus, do not let me waver!

Part V: Cantata for the First Sunday in the New Year
“Ehre sei dir, Gott, gesungen”

Chorus
Let honor be sung to You, o God,
praise and thanks be prepared for You.
All the world exalts You,
since our well-being was Your pleasure,
since today
all our wishes have come to pass,
since Your blessing so gloriously delights us.

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the Jewish lands at the time of King Herod, behold, there came sages from the east towards Jerusalem and said:

Chorus (*Wise Men*) and Recitative (Alto)
“*Where is the new-born King of the Jews?*”
Seek Him within my breast,
He lives here, to His and my delight!
“*We have seen His star in the east and have*
come to make our devotions to Him.”
Happy are you, who have seen this light,
it has appeared for your salvation!
My Savior, You, You are the light,
that shall shine also for the heathens,
and they, they do not yet know You,
yet they already wish to honor You.
How bright, how clear must your radiance be,
beloved Jesus!

Chorale
Your radiance destroys all darkness,
the troubled night is transfigured with light.

Lead us on Your paths,
so that Your face
and glorious light
might always be visible to us!

Aria (Bass)

Illumine my dark thoughts as well,
illumine my heart
through the rays of your clear brilliance!
Your word shall be the brightest candle for me
in all my doings;
this will never let my soul initiate evil.

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and with him all of Jerusalem.

Recitative (Alto)

Why are you afraid?
Can the presence of my Jesus awaken such
fear in you?
O! Should you not rather
much more rejoice over this,
since He has promised through this
to renew the happy destiny of humanity.

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

And he had all the high priests and interpreters of Scripture among the people gathered together, and inquired of them where Christ was supposed to be born. And they answered him: In Bethlehem in the Jewish lands: for thus it is written through the Prophets: and you, Bethlehem, in the Jewish lands, are by no means the least among the princes of Judah; for out of you shall come the leader to me, who shall be a Lord over my people Israel.

Aria (Trio: Soprano, Alto, Tenor)

Ah, when will the time appear?
Ah, when will the comfort of the faithful come?
—Hush, He is truly already here!—
Jesus, ah, then come to me!

Recitative (Alto)

My beloved already reigns.
A heart that loves His governance
and gives itself utterly to Him as His own,
is my Jesus' throne.

Chorale

Indeed such a heart's closet
may be no ornate princely chamber,
rather a dark pit;
yet, as soon as Your beams of grace
only peep within it,
it seems to be full of sunshine.

Part VI: Cantata for the Feast of the Epiphany

“Herr, wenn die stolzen Feinde schnauben”

Chorus

Lord, when our proud enemies snarl,
then grant that, in firm faith,
we can look for Your help and strength!

We will trust in You alone,
thus we can escape the sharp claws
of the enemy unscathed.

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor], Herod [Bass])

Then Herod summoned the sages secretly and cleverly discovered from them when the star had appeared. And he directed them towards Bethlehem and said:
—Go there and seek diligently for the infant, and when you find it, report to me, so that I can also come and pay my devotions to it.

Recitative (Soprano)

Liar, you seek only to destroy the Lord;
You employ all false trickery
to supplant the Savior;
yet He, whose power no man can measure,
remains in secure hands.
Your heart, your false heart is already,
with all its deceit, very well known
to the Son of the Highest whom you seek to crush.

Aria (Soprano)

Only a wave of His hands
topples the impotent power of humans.
Here all strength is laughable!
If the Highest speaks only a word,
to terminate the pride of His enemies,
o, then how immediately must
the thoughts of mortals be turned aside!

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

When they had heard the King, they went away. And behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them until it came and stood over where the infant was.
When they saw the star, they were highly delighted, and went into the house, and found the infant with Mary, His mother; and they fell down and worshipped Him and presented their treasures; and they gave Him gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Chorale

I stand here by Your cradle,
o little Jesus, my life;
I come, I bring and give to You,
what You have given to me.
Take it! It is my spirit and mind,
heart, soul, and will, take all of it,
and let it be pleasing to You!

Recitative (Evangelist [Tenor])

And God commanded them in a dream that they should not journey back to Herod, and they travelled by another way back to their own land.

Recitative (Tenor)

Go then! It is enough, my treasure does not leave here,
He remains here with me,
I also will not let Him leave me.
His arm will, out of love,
embrace me with tender emotions
and the greatest gentleness;
He shall remain my bridegroom,
I will dedicate my heart and breast to Him.

I surely know that He loves me,
my heart loves Him inwardly as well
and will always honor Him.
What kind of enemy now, amid such happiness, could harm me!
You, Jesus, are and remain my Friend;
and if I will beseech you anxiously:
Lord, help! then let me see assistance!

Aria (Tenor)

Now, you arrogant enemies, you may tremble;
what kind of fear can you arouse in me?
My treasure, my sanctuary is here with me.
You may seem still so horrible,
threatening to defeat me once and for all,
yet see! My Savior lives here.

Recitative (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass)

How can hell frighten now,
what can the world and sin do to us,
since we are safe in Jesus' hands?

Chorale

Now you are well avenged
upon the horde of your enemies,
since Christ has pulverized
what was contrary to you.
Death, devil, sin and hell
are weakened once and for all;
the place of the human race
is next to God.

To Read and Hear More...

Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician by Christoph Wolff, eminent Bach scholar, Harvard professor emeritus, and BSO/GHO Artistic Advisor, remains the best of many fine general biographies of the composer (Oxford University Press paperback). Of particular interest is John Harbison's new book, *What Do We Make of Bach?—Portraits, Essays, Notes*, published just this fall (Ars Nova). Other recent general biographies include Peter Williams's large *Bach: A Musical Biography* (Cambridge University hardcover, 2016) and his *J.S. Bach: A Life in Music*, which takes the intriguing path of constructing a life of the composer using, as a jumping-off point, the famous 1754 obituary written by his son, Carl Philip Emanuel Bach, and J.S. Bach's pupil, J.F. Agricola (Cambridge University paperback, 2007). *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work* by Martin Geck, a professor at the University of Dortmund, Germany, was translated by John Hargraves and published in the U.S. in 2006 (Harcourt). The conductor John Eliot Gardiner's *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven* is biography from a scholar/performer's perspective, with some elements of a personal memoir (Vintage paperback). Christoph Wolff's *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music* is an earlier collection of self-contained essays, tending toward greater specificity of subject. Of great general interest, and fun to peruse, is *J.S. Bach* in the Oxford Composer Companions series, which contains encyclopedia-like entries by dozens of scholars on hundreds of individual Bach-related topics. This was edited by Malcolm Boyd, who also wrote the general-interest biography *Bach* in the "Master Musicians" series (Oxford University Press). Also of broad appeal is *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, edited by John Butt (Cambridge). *The Worlds of Johann Sebastian Bach*, edited by Raymond Erickson, is a collection of essays on the influence of context and environment on Bach's music (Amadeus Press). The J.S. Bach essay in the revised New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (2001) is by Christoph Wolff, somewhat but not radically changed from his essay in the 1980 New Grove. The earlier essay, along with the essays on Bach's musically significant family members, was reprinted in a separate volume, *The New Grove Bach Family* (Norton paperback). *The New Bach Reader*, edited by Arthur Mendel and Hans David and revised by Christoph Wolff, compiles a biographical picture of Bach via citations from letters and other period documents in English translation (Norton). For important older sources, Albert Schweitzer's and Philip Spitta's biographies are still available in reprint editions (both Dover

paperback). Studies of the *Christmas Oratorio* include Daniel R. Melamed's *Listening to Bach: The Mass in B minor and the Christmas Oratorio* (Oxford University Press, 2018) and Markus Rathey's *Johann Sebastian Bach's Christmas Oratorio: Music, Theology, Culture* (Oxford, 2016). A beautiful facsimile edition, with commentary by Christoph Wolff and Martina Rebmann, of the manuscript of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, also including a facsimile of the original libretto (Leipzig, 1734), was published just this year (Bärenreiter).

Recordings of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* include John Eliot Gardiner's with the English Baroque Soloists and Monteverdi Choir (Arkiv), Nikolaus Harnoncourt's with the Vienna Concentus Musicus and Arnold Schoenberg Choir (Sony), Philippe Herreweghe's with the Collegium Vocale Gent (Erato), Karl Münchinger's with the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra and Lübeck Kantorei (Decca), Helmuth Rilling's with the Gächinger Kantorei Stuttgart and Stuttgart Bach Collegium (Hänssler Classic), Karl Richter's with the Munich Bach Orchestra and Choir (Deutsche Grammophon), and Masaaki Suzuki's with the Bach Collegium Japan (BIS). Carolyn Sampson, the BSO's soprano soloist this week, can be heard in Riccardo Chailly's recording of the *Christmas Oratorio* with the Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig and Dresden Chamber Choir (Decca). Tenor Sebastian Kohlhepp can be heard in Hans-Christoph Rademann's recording with the Gächinger Cantorey (Carus).

Robert Kirzinger/Marc Mandel