

## **Christmas Oratorio**

**Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685 - 1750)

In June 1722 Johann Kuhnau, the *Kantor* of St Thomas's, Leipzig – we would call him the Director of Music – passed away. Bach was one of six applicants for the vacancy, but as far as the appointing Council was concerned, the most outstanding candidate for this most prestigious post was a highly respected musician already well known in Leipzig, Georg Philipp Telemann. He was elected unanimously by the Council members, but to their great disappointment he turned down the offer, and so they turned to their second choice, Christoph Graupner, a former pupil of Kuhnau. He was unable to secure his release from his current position and therefore had no alternative but to withdraw his application. In desperation the Council offered the job to Bach, who at that time was hardly known in Leipzig. One official observed that as the best musicians were not available they had no option but to take one of the mediocre ones!

And so in May 1723 Bach was appointed *Kantor* of St Thomas, Leipzig, where he remained until his death in 1750. It was a hugely demanding post. In return for the distinctly meagre salary he was required to teach both Latin and music at the St Thomasschule, play the organ, train the choir and compose the music for the two main Lutheran churches in the city - Thomaskirche and Nikolaikirche – as well as supervising and training the musicians at two others. He was also responsible for hiring any orchestral players and singers needed for the church services. With such an enormous workload it is hardly surprising that Bach was involved in several disputes with the city authorities, who periodically complained that he was not discharging his duties properly. There were also constant financial wrangles. Despite these unpromising circumstances, Bach composed some of his greatest music during this period. His choral compositions alone include such enduring masterpieces as the *Mass in B minor*, the *St John* and *St Matthew Passions*, some 250 church cantatas and the *Christmas Oratorio*.

For his first Christmas Day service in the new job, Bach composed an impressive *Sanctus*, which he later incorporated into his *Mass in B minor*. The *Christmas Oratorio* was not written until 1734. Because of the pressure of work, and since at that time there were limited opportunities for repeat performances, Bach borrowed extensively from other pieces that he had written previously, both sacred and secular. This was standard practice for the period; Handel's arias and choruses, for instance, are often reworkings of earlier pieces. Bach adapted this existing music and composed much new material as well. The text, which is based on the account of the Nativity given in the Gospels according to St Luke and St Matthew, was compiled by Christian Friedrich Henrici, otherwise known as Picander, whom Bach held in high regard. He had already provided the libretto for the *St Matthew Passion*, and it is thought that Bach himself may well have assisted him in compiling the *Christmas Oratorio* text, though how he could have found time to do this in addition to all his statutory obligations remains a mystery.

Although collectively the individual movements of the *Christmas Oratorio* form a continuous musical account of the Christmas story, Bach did not conceive the work as one uninterrupted work, as might be inferred from the title 'oratorio', but rather as a sequence of six cantatas to be performed on six separate occasions - the three days of Christmas (25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>), New Year's Day, the Sunday after New Year and the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6<sup>th</sup>). The fact that the instrumental requirements for each cantata differ quite considerably is a further indication that Bach never intended them to be performed as one work. For these reasons it is quite usual to hear performances of the *Christmas Oratorio* comprising only a part of the whole sequence.

The oratorio is a dramatic mixture of recitatives, choruses and arias. The tenor soloist (Evangelist) acts as a Narrator in a series of recitatives, with other figures traditionally associated with the Christmas story - the angels and the shepherds, for example - also making an appearance. The choir introduces the first and third cantatas with a rousing chorus of praise, and provides further commentary throughout, mainly in the form of chorales. These Lutheran hymn-tunes, richly harmonised by Bach, were very familiar to eighteenth century congregations, who very probably joined in with them just as they would have done during church services. The most extended movements are the arias, which are poetic meditations on the deeper spiritual significance of the unfolding events. Although the accompaniments to these sections are usually for only a few instruments, they reveal Bach at his most inventive, with different combinations of instrumental and vocal soloists weaving decorative solo lines around each other in a succession of masterly displays of the art of counterpoint.

Bach's unerring grasp of the dramatic possibilities inherent in the text is realised primarily by means of distinctive musical contrasts. The straightforward structure of the chorales and recitatives is balanced by the longer and much more sophisticated forms of the arias and choruses. Simple rhythm and melody is contrasted with elaborate counterpoint. Solo movements are succeeded by choruses, and sparse accompaniments alternate with full, rich instrumental textures. Particularly striking is the way in which harmonically simple sections throw into relief the extraordinary boldness of Bach's

matchless harmonic inventiveness elsewhere.

*programme notes by John Bawden*

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