

In the history of Western music, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is universally regarded as one of the supreme masters. Bach composed in nearly all of the available musical styles and genres of his day except for opera, and that was due only to a lack of opportunity. His compositions are well known for their technical mastery and emotional complexity. As one of the defining composers of the Baroque Period, his large-scale vocal works, such as the *B Minor Mass*, the *Passions of St. Matthew* and *St. John*, and the *Christmas Oratorio* are well known. Less familiar are the delights of most of his church cantatas. It is the aim of today's program to provide you with the opportunity to experience several of these splendid cantatas.

Born into a musical family in Eisenach, Germany, Bach received a thorough training that included exposure to music of the most important German, French, and Italian composers of his day. He exhibited exceptional skill as an organist, and his first professional position, beginning in 1703, was as the organist at St. Boniface's in Arnstadt. It was during this period that Bach made the 250 mile trip to Lübeck, where he spent three months visiting the great organist and composer, Dietrich Buxtehude, and studying his music.

Dissatisfied with the conditions at Arnstadt, Bach accepted a position in 1706 at St. Blasius's church in Mühlhausen, where he met and married his first wife, Maria Barbara. Three years later, in 1708, Bach had the opportunity to accept a position as organist and concertmaster at the ducal court in Weimar. He spent the next nine years playing and composing chiefly keyboard and instrumental music, although he did compose a few sacred cantatas. Most of his other 200 surviving cantatas were composed while Bach was at Leipzig (1723-1750), where his duties required that he produce one cantata a week.

Bach began his tenure at Leipzig on June 1, 1723. He was actually the third choice for this position. The City Council's first choice was Georg Phillip Telemann, but he was not inclined to give up his prestigious position in Hamburg. Their second choice was Christoph Graupner, but he was not able to gain release from his position at the court of the Landgraf of Hesse at Darmstadt. Thus, the position was given to Bach. His chief responsibilities at Leipzig were to provide music every Sunday for the St. Thomas Church and the St. Nicholas Church, as well as run the school attached to St. Thomas. He was to teach singing and the playing of various instruments, as well as to teach Latin. This latter task he was allowed to delegate to four assistants, which he was happy to do.

In all of his sacred works, Bach's personal faith underlies his expressing, with great immediacy, a persistent longing for God's presence and an abiding trust in God's protection through life's trials, as well as a fierce determination to abide with Jesus throughout his life. It is this undercurrent of Bach's own faith that seems to allow his music to speak so clearly to listeners of every age and faith.

In the Sunday morning service in Bach's time, it was customary to perform a cantata inspired by the liturgical readings for the day both before and after the sermon. Occasionally, Bach would compose a two-part cantata to surround the sermon. An example of this on today's program is Cantata 147. In place of a sermon, we will substitute a reading of the Gospel for the day: Luke 1: 39-56. We know from written records that Bach composed five cycles of cantatas for the liturgical year while in Leipzig; sadly, fewer than 200 survive of what was probably as many as 500 or more cantatas.

While in Leipzig, Bach refined the previously existing “chorale cantata,” that is, a cantata in which the first and last movements set the first and last stanzas of the hymn text and the hymn tune is sounded within a new contrapuntal texture. The texts of the middle movements are often paraphrases of the middle stanzas, composed as recitatives and arias, providing the necessary freedom for expansion on the themes and emotions inherent in the chosen text.

Today’s Program

Wo soll ich fliehen hin?, BWV 5, a chorale cantata, is composed for four voices, two oboes, oboe d’amore, trumpet, two violins, viola, cello, and organ. It was first performed in Leipzig on the 19th Sunday after Trinity on October 15, 1725. Bach repeated it in Leipzig sometime between 1732 and 1735. The chorale text was written by Johann Heermann (1585-1647), who is regarded as the greatest writer of chorale texts in the period between Martin Luther and Paul Gerhardt. As is the case with many of Bach’s cantata, the music reflects a movement from anxiety and despair to acceptance and confidence in God’s mercy and salvation. The first and final movements set stanzas of the original chorale text, while the remaining movements offer paraphrases of other stanzas of the chorale text by an anonymous author, perhaps Bach himself. The tenor aria features a virtuosic obbligato part for viola. In all of his surviving cantatas, this is one of only two times Bach composed for the viola in this way. The alto recitative is unusual in its inclusion of the chorale tune played by solo oboe. The marvelous bass aria, featuring a stirring part for trumpet, demonstrates the power of the saved against the hordes of Hell. The final recitative and chorale emphasize the redeeming power of Christ’s blood.

Jesu, der du meine Seele, BWV 78, another chorale cantata, was composed for the 14th Sunday after Trinity and was first performed on September 10, 1724. It is written for four voices, flute, oboe, strings, and organ. One of Bach’s greatest and most popular cantatas, it is one of the most frequently performed and most often recorded. The opening chorale-fantasia is a masterpiece of contrapuntal and expressive content. Set over a chromatic passacaglia-like bass, the chorale tune is set forth in the soprano, wreathed by intricate counterpoint in the three lower voices. The following duet for soprano and alto is, in contrast, one of Bach’s most joyful compositions. The tenor recitative is in effect a mini-sermon, with the ensuing aria with flute obbligato presenting a reflection of the healing power of Jesus’ blood. The elaborate bass recitative muses on Christ’s sacrifice and the benefits from it that come to the believer. The final aria that follows, reflects feelings of confidence and hope

Herz und Mund und That und Leben BWV 147, was composed for the Feast of the Visitation of Mary and was performed on July 2, 1723. It is written for two oboes, two oboes da caccia, bassoon, trumpet, strings, and organ. The Feast of the Visitation of Mary celebrates Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, who was then pregnant with John the Baptist. The predominant mood of this cantata is one of joy, with exhortations to embrace Jesus. The texts of the opening chorus and the arias were written by Salomo Franck (1659-1725), while the recitative texts are written by an anonymous author. The chorale texts that conclude each part are by Martin Jahn (1620-1682). This chorale setting, which appears twice in the cantata, has become very famous and is known in English as “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring”.

A Note on Performance Practices

Forty years ago, Joshua Rifkin jolted the musicological world with a thesis that Bach's cantatas, passions, and oratorios were performed under his direction by a single singer on each part, instead of three or four, as many believed. This stirred a furious debate at the time, and these vigorous discussions continue to this day. However, the evidence for this practice is quite convincing, and the practice is becoming more widely accepted. While there is no question that performances of Bach's cantatas and passions with choirs of 12, 24, 100 or more singers are tremendously moving and inspirational, we believe that there is much to be gained from the more intimate approach that results from performing these pieces with only one singer or player to a part. Not only does this practice reflect the experience of Bach's original audience, but the resulting musical texture offers greater clarity in the interplay of the voices and instruments and enlivens the music-making among the participants by bringing the music to a more personal and individual level. So, the performances you are hearing today, we believe, are probably reflective of the way Bach would have expected these pieces to be heard.

Instrumental Considerations

Several of the instruments heard on today's program may be unfamiliar to you. The *oboe d'amore*, featured in Cantata 5, was a uniquely German instrument, despite the fact that in Bach's day it was most often called *hautbois d'amour*. It is not known how this instrument came to be called "*d'amore*." It was developed sometime around 1710, most likely in Leipzig, by local players and instrument makers. The *oboe d'amore* had a relatively short life in the 18th century. Noted oboist Bruce Haynes, in his highly regarded history of the oboe, states that two-thirds of the repertory of the *oboe d'amore* was composed between 1717 and 1730, most of the remaining third between 1730 and 1760, and less than 2% after 1760. The instrument was revived in a modern form later in the 19th century, appearing in Verdi's *Aida* and works of Richard Strauss, Ravel, and others. The *oboe d'amore* is pitched a minor third lower than the regular oboe, which allows it to play more easily in keys that would otherwise be highly problematic. Its distinctive sound, darker and richer than the higher oboe, makes it a wonderful solo instrument. Even rarer is the *oboe da caccia*, also developed in Leipzig early in the 18th century. This is, in effect, a tenor oboe pitched a fifth lower than the regular oboe. The French version of this instrument is called a "*taille*" and will be heard on this concert as well. The chief difference between these instruments is that the *oboe da caccia* is curved and the *taille* has a straight form. The trumpet of Bach's time was without valves or keys, just simple tubing with a mouthpiece. They were limited to the notes of the overtone series. Most often pitched in D, they could be adapted to play in lower keys by adding extra tubing, called a 'crook' that increased the length of the sounding tube. One of the challenges of Cantata BWV 5 is that it requires a trumpet in B flat. Our trumpet player has been able to obtain a crook of this size to allow him to play this difficult part. It should also be noted that, unlike the modern trumpet, its dynamic is more or less equivalent to the other wind instruments, helping it to blend seamlessly into the texture of the orchestra. The other common adaptation used in Bach's day was to add an extra bit of tubing that contains a slide that allows the player to access additional notes by moving the slide and thus changing the sounding length of the trumpet. This was referred to as a 'tromba da tirarsi' and will be heard in several of the movements on today's program.

One of our principal goals in presenting our concerts is to bring to our listeners an enhanced musical experience, through our programming of little-heard music in an historically-informed manner, and through the use of appropriate instruments. It is our heartfelt hope that our performances will open an exciting new world of sonorities and sensibilities to you, our listeners and supporters.