



Sydney
Festival
2024

JS BACH -
A LIFE IN MUSIC

WELCOME TO JS BACH - A LIFE IN MUSIC

It is entirely beyond even the greatest of musicians to create an adequate musical journey through Bach's life in one small evening, given his immense output, reach and impact. However, I have chosen a precious few compositions that I believe help us understand his journey as man and musician through his life, which proved of inestimable value to the whole human race.

CANTATA BWV 106 - ACTUS TRAGICUS

Bach's life is often categorised into three periods, those being Weimar, Cöthen and Leipzig, the locations he spent most time in the employment of patrons or the church. But what about earlier times? I am personally fascinated by the early Bach, having been orphaned so young, brought up reluctantly by his much elder brother, and set off into the world at such a tender age. While there is much speculation about this work's purpose and date of composition, it was probably composed sometime in 1707 or 1708 during Bach's short tenure as organist at the Blasiuskirche in Mühlhausen. It staggers me that this young man could have conceived of this piece which certainly doesn't sound like that of a young man. It is his first Pyramid cantata, meaning it follows a symmetrical mirror-like pattern with a pivotal *clef de voûte* (keystone) right in the middle. Bach will incorporate this structure throughout his career, including in some of his grandest compositions: the St. John and St. Matthew Passions and the Goldberg Variations. Showing his remarkable imagination for instrumentation, he chooses a pair of gambas combined with a pair of recorders supported by basso continuo, a combination not to be seen again until modern times. Bach could not have chosen a more suave, comforting or peaceful combination of instruments for what is essentially a funeral cantata transformed into a picture of Paradise - the earthly Paradise we lost and the Heavenly Paradise awaiting us. Death is presented not as a tragic end but as a blissful sleep, attaining man's eternal salvation. In this, Bach not only shows his taste and compositional skill, he displays a profound understanding of history. With Old Testament quotations for the first part, he restricts himself to lower voices interweaving stern old-style motet fugato as a symbol for 'der alte Bund' (the old bond), until the soprano voice heralds the voice of Christ and announces the New Covenant. The work can thus finish in the spirit of Luther's Chorale 'Fried und Freud' (Peace and joy) which transforms the tone and texture of the ensemble, finishing with a threefold angelic 'Amen'. The depth and emotional power of this music, combined with the intellectual prowess, makes this a work of towering genius.

BRANDENBURG CONCERTO NO.5 IN D MAJOR BWV 1050

After his time in Mühlhausen, Bach gained employment in Weimar in the year 1708. It was during these years he was thought to have composed the basis of his 6 concerti. His next port of call was of course Cöthen where he came to be in the employ of the music loving Prince Leopold Anhalt - Cöthen. In 1719, Bach was sent to Berlin to play a new harpsichord for the court of his patron. Here, he played before Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg. Just 2 years later, he sent the manuscripts of his 6 Concerti to the Margrave, with an inscription in his best French relaying his feelings on the matter: "I beg Your Royal Highness very humbly...to be assured that nothing is so close to my heart as the wish that I may be employed on occasions more worthy of Your Royal Highness and of Your Highness's service—I, who without an equal in zeal, am, Sire, Your Royal Highness's most humble and obedient servant - Jean Sebastien Bach." One must conclude that Bach was after employment from the Margrave, but history tells us this did not eventuate. The manuscript was dated 24 March 1721, just months after Bach had returned home from a trip with his patron Leopold's court to the spa at Carlsbad, only to find his wife, Maria Barbara, had died, leaving him widowed with four children to support. Despite the tragic circumstances surrounding these wondrous works, these Concerti are a marvel. Brandenburg No. 5 is an historic landmark. It is the first concerto in which the harpsichord is elevated to the rank of soloist. It begins as a first among equals, sharing the solo passages with solo violin and flute, shifting in and out of swirling 32nd-notes. The cadenza that concludes the first movement gives us a glimpse of Bach the virtuoso improviser. Not only is this solo unusual for its 65-bar length but also for the framework of thematic material that bookends an extraordinary improvisatory passage of accumulating intensity. The second movement, a trio sonata, restores the flute and violin as equal soloists, with the right hand of the harpsichord contributing a third treble melody while the bass line returns to its continuo duties. The third movement is also more equitable in the distribution of solo material, a hybrid of a gigue-fugue and a ritornello form. The harpsichord has a brief solo episode in the manner of a two-part invention, and running passagework in double-time under the other instruments, though more in an effort to remain audible than for overt virtuosic display. The concerto ends as it began, with the harpsichord returning to its continuo accompanist duties, sweeping out the fireplace after the ball.

J.S BACH MOTET 'LOBET DEN HERRN' BWV 230

I find that is always the unlikely heroes, the success against heavy odds, or sliding door moments that tend to produce the most fascinating and enduring stories. It was essential for Bach to move away from Cöthen to a position of more secure employment following the tragic death of his first wife and the pressing need to support his remaining children. He succeeded eventually, the city of Leipzig being the lucky beneficiary of this extraordinary man's talents. Bach was in need of a wife, and a wife he found, in the form of the beautiful, talented and above all supportive Anna Magdalena. His new found stability and happiness provided the fertile ground upon which his music genius could flourish. Here he began the mighty 5 cycles of cantatas we now consider one of the greatest achievements of western civilisation, and the many, many other works we know and love today, including his motets.

Bach's first biographer, Forkel, refers to "many single- and double-choir motets", implying that there are many others, though only six complete ones and a few scattered movements survive today. This motet comes from a collection of 6 German motets by Bach, grouped together in the 20th Century by the Bach- Werke-Verzeichnis catalogue, listed as BWV 225-231. All of his motets were intended for use at either funeral, church or other civic occasions, however sadly there is little evidence to pinpoint exactly which ones and where they were first performed. There has also been much conjecture as to whether this particular Motet was indeed composed by Bach or not, as the first evidence of its existence did not appear until 1821 when it was first published by Breitkopf and Härtel in Leipzig. However, it is clear in my mind by the style and skill of the fugue passages that few, that is to say none other than Bach could have composed such a work of genius. The text is taken entirely from only two verses of Psalm 117. Unlike the other motets which are scored for double choir, BWV 230 is scored for only 4 voices. It is constructed in 5 distinct sections, with the continuo being largely independent underneath the voices.

All of Bach's motets are beautiful, some joyous, some reflective, but each a jewel of the repertoire and truly wonderful to listen to. The text of this motet is particularly significant to us and the world at large this week as it talks about 'all nations and all peoples, grace and truth'. Never have those words been more relevant, and never have we been more overjoyed to perform them.

J.S. BACH CANTATA BWV 42 'AM ABEND ABER DESSELBIGEN SABBATS'

How Bach came to be appointed Kantor in Leipzig is a story of chance and luck. He was, after all, only third in line for the job after Telemann, Christoph Graupner and Johann Friedrich Fasch who all turned down the position due to the difficulties of the job. Even when the authorities eventually got around to asking Bach to audition for the role, it was not made easy for him, being asked to sign a document formally stating his desire to take up the position, then audition with several of his compositions. He did this humbly with Cantatas 22 and 23, which are for those in the know, some of the most sublime compositions Bach ever wrote. He was duly appointed with some enthusiasm, I am pleased to report.

Bach opens his cantata "Am Abend desselbigen Sabbaths" (On the evening of the same Sabbath) with an extended Sinfonia, grand yet lightly sprung, that pits bustling strings against a clucking group of two oboes and bassoon in a magnificent display of inventiveness. The whole work is a cunning recycling of a lost birthday serenata for Prince Leopold of Anhalt- Cöthen. First performed in 1725 on Quasimodogeniti Sunday (the first Sunday after Easter), it forms part of Bach's second Leipzig cycle with a text expounding on Christ's appearance to his disciples a week after the Resurrection. An immaculate miniature of religious storytelling, the Evangelist's role is shared between tenor and bass soloists, with reflective arias for alto and bass and a chorale duet for soprano and tenor. To drive the drama forward, the first recitative employs ticking continuo with striking harmonic progressions to create an eerie build-up to the divine manifestation. Bach then dramatically offsets his recit with an alto aria writing for a pair of melancholy oboes contrasting the hope of future joys with memories of happier times while reflecting on Matthew 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

The following chorale duet with its plucky bassoon does a sterling job of lifting the spirits before the bass launches into "Jesus ist ein Schild der Seinen" (Jesus shields His own people), a fiery aria that focusses on the Saviour's hoped for protection when persecution strikes. Fortunately, a final Lutheran chorale is on hand to pacify matters with the rather pointed request that, like God in his Heaven, local authorities should offer some much-needed "good government and peace".

And so we end our journey through the life of this great man. It is my most sincere hope that many more generations of the human race will hear and benefit from experiencing the works of Bach, find the consolation, the joy and the deep satisfaction of the soul that I have found in them. I find myself contemplating the question of what might have happened had he never lived? And then I return to contemplating the enormity of what did happen as a result of this one moment in history. We can all but lay down and give thanks to this man for his gift to us.

BACH AKADEMIE AUSTRALIA

Learn more about Bach Akademie Australia at bachakademieaustralia.com.au

CANTATA BWV 106 GOTTES ZEIT IST DIE ALLERBESTE ZEIT

1. Sonatina

2a. Chor

Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit,
In ihn leben, weben und sind wir,
solange er will.

In ihm sterben wir zur rechten Zeit, wenn er will.

*God's time is the very best time,
'In him we live, move, and have our being', as
long as He wills.*

In Him we die at the right time, when He wills.

2b. Arioso – Tenor

Ach, Herr, lehre uns bedenken, daß wir sterben müssen,
auf daß wir klug werden.

*Ah Lord, 'teach us to remember that we must die,
so that we may become wise.'*

2c. Aria – Bass

Bestelle dein Haus; denn du wirst sterben und
nicht lebendig bleiben!

*'Put your house in order, for you shall die and not
remain living!*

2d. Chor und Arioso – Soprano

Es ist der alte Bund: Mensch, du mußt sterben!
komm, Herr Jesu!

*'It is the Old Covenant:' man, 'you must die!' Ja,
'Yes, come Lord Jesus!'*

3a. Aria – Alto

In deine Hände befehl ich meinen Geist; du hast mich
erlöset, Herr, du getreuer Gott.

*'into Your hands I commit my spirit; you have
redeemed me, Lord You faithful God.'*

3b. Arioso and Choral – Bass and Alto

Heute wirst du mit mir im Paradies sein.
Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin
In Gottes Willen,
Getrost ist mir mein Herz und Sinn,
Sanft und stille.
Wie Gott mir verheißen hat:
Der Tod ist mein Schlaf worden.

*'Today, you shall be with Me in paradise.'
With peace and joy I go to that place
According to the will of God;
My heart and mind are established,
Meek and quiet.
As God has promised me:
Death has become my sleep.*

4. Chor

Glorie, Lob, Ehr und Herrlichkeit
Sei dir, Gott Vater und Sohn bereit',
Dem Heiligen Geist mit Namen!
Die göttlich Kraft
Mach uns sieghaft
Durch Jesum Christum, Amen.

*Glory, praise, honour and majesty
Be given to You, God the Father and Son
And to the Holy Spirit by name!
May the power of God
Make us victorious
Through Jesus Christ, Amen.*

Translation – Alfred Dürr

J.S BACH MOTET 'LOBET DEN HERRN' BWV 230

Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden,
und preiset ihn, alle Völker!
Denn seine Gnade und Wahrheit
waltet über uns in Ewigkeit.
Alleluja.

*Praise the Lord, all the heathens
And celebrate him, all the peoples!
For his grace and truth
Reign over us for ever.
Alléluia !*

BWV 42 'AM ABEND ABER DESSELBIGEN SABBATS'

1. Sinfonia

2. Recit (Tenor)

Am Abend aber desselbigen Sabbats,
Da die Jünger versammelt
Und die Türen verschlossen waren
Aus Furcht für den Jüden,
Kam Jesus und trat mitten ein.

*On the evening of the same sabbath
as the disciples were gathered together
and the doors were locked
for fear of the Jews
Jesus came and stood in the midst of them.*

3. Aria (Alto)

Wo zwei und drei versammelt sind
In Jesu teurem Namen,
Da stellt sich Jesus mitten ein
Und spricht darzu das Amen.
Denn was aus Lieb und Not geschieht,
Das bricht des Höchsten Ordnung nicht.

*Where two or three are gathered together
in Jesus's beloved name,
then Jesus appears in the midst of them
and says to them Amen.
For what happens from law and necessity
does not break the arrangements of the most*

4. Chorale Duet (Soprano/Tenor)

Verzage nicht, o Häuflein klein
Obschon die Feinde willens sein,
Dich gänzlich zu verstören,
Und suchen deinen Untergang,
Davon dir wird recht angst und bang:
Es wird nicht lange währen.

*Do not lose heart, oh my dear little flock,
even if your enemies intend
to destroy you completely
and seek your downfall,
so that you're really distressed and fearful:
this will not last long.*

5. Recit (Bass)

Man kann hiervon ein schön Exempel sehen
An dem, was zu Jerusalem geschehen;
Denn da die Jünger sich versammelt hatten
Im finstern Schatten,
Aus Furcht für denen Jüden,
So trat mein Heiland mitten ein,
Zum Zeugnis, dass er seiner Kirche Schutz will sein.
Drum lasst die Feinde wüten!

*An excellent example of this can be seen
in what happened in Jerusalem;
for when the disciples had gathered together
in dark shadows
for fear of those Jews,
then my saviour came into the midst of them,
As witness that he will be the protection
Therefore let the enemies rage.*

6. Aria (Bass)

Jesus ist ein Schild der Seinen,
Wenn sie die Verfolgung trifft.
Ihnen muss die Sonne scheinen
Mit der güldnen Überschrift:
Jesus ist ein Schild der Seinen,
Wenn sie die Verfolgung trifft.

*Jesus is a shield for his people
when persecution strikes them.
For them the sun must shine
with the words written in gold:
Jesus is a shield for his people
when persecution strikes them.*

7. Chorale

Verleih uns Frieden gnädiglich,
Herr Gott, zu unsern Zeiten;
Es ist doch ja kein anderer nicht,
Der für uns könnte streiten,
Denn du, unsr Gott, alleine.

7. Chorale

*Graciously grant us peace
Lord God, in our time;
there is no one else
who could fight for us
except you, our God, alone.*

Gib unsern Fürsten und all'r Obrigkeit
Fried und gut Regiment,
Dass wir unter ihnen
Ein geruhig und stilles Leben führen mögen
In aller Gottseligkeit und Ehrbarkeit. Amen

*Grant to our princes and those in authority
peace and good government
so that we under them
may lead a calm and peaceful life
in all godliness and respectability. Amen*