

Bach Ascension Oratorio BWV 11 (Novello edition ed. N. Jenkins)

HISTORY AND ORIGINS OF THE WORK

During the 1730s Bach set about preparing a library of music to meet all the needs of the Church year at the Leipzig churches for which he provided the music. Having prepared several cycles of cantatas for the Sunday services, during his first years as Cantor (1723 – approx. 1732), he next turned his attention to the major festivals.

Reusing several secular cantatas written in praise of noble members of the House of Saxony in 1733-4 he constructed both the Christmas Oratorio and the Easter Oratorio out of arias and choruses that would, otherwise, have only received a one-off performance. *1

The work which he prepared for the Feast of the Ascension in 1735, and which was first performed on 19th May of that year, was derived from similar secular cantatas written for a single specific occasion. Like the Christmas Oratorio and the Easter Oratorio it employed a similarly festive orchestration, using the three trumpets and timpani of the Town Band that were available to Bach on such occasions, together with pairs of flutes and oboes, and a complement of strings. The outer movements were, like the other oratorios, in the bright ceremonial key of D major.

Scholars have been divided about the origins of the work, although it has been suspected since the time of Philip Spitta (c. 1880) that some of the movements may well have been parodies of earlier compositions.*2 Albert Schweitzer was the first to draw attention to some unusual word-setting in the opening chorus *Lobet Gott*,*3 whilst it was Andre Pirro who soon followed this up with a suggestion that the movement might have been based on the opening chorus of a secular cantata *Froher Tag, verlangte Stunden* (BWV Anh. 18). This cantata was sung on 5 June 1732 on the occasion of the dedication of the rebuilt and enlarged St Thomas' School. Since only the libretto of this work (by Johann Heinrich Winkler) survives, the suggestion was made on the evidence of the similar scansion and joyful nature of the two texts, as well as the pivotal use of the same rhyme words in lines 3 and 6.*4

BWV Anh. 18

Froher Tag, verlangte Stunden,
Nun hat unsre Lust gefunden,
Was sie fest und ruhig macht.
Hier steht unser Schulgebäude,
Hier erblicket Aug' und Freude,
Kunst und Ordnung, Zier und Pracht.

(Johann Heinrich Winckler)

BWV 11

Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen,

Preiset ihn in seinen Ehren,
 rühmet ihn in seiner Pracht.
 Sucht sein Lob recht zu vergleichen,
 wenn ihr mit gesamten Chören
 Ihm ein Lied zu Ehren macht.

(unknown author, possibly 'Picander')

A later scholar, Friedrich Smend, disputed this and made an alternative suggestion that the chorus was, in fact, derived from a cantata composed by Bach for birthday celebrations on 15 August 1726, with a text by his usual librettist Christian Friedrich Henrici, 'Picander'.^{*5} He made the point that the unusual musical underlay noted by Schweitzer, (at bb. 90-1 and 122-3 in the soprano part) as well as the underlay of the words '*Lange, lange*' at bb. 93-6 were better served by this text, and that the long melismas at bb. 128-132 would very happily fall on the word '*erfreuen*':

Kommt, ihr angenehmen Blicke,
 Allemal vergnugt zurucke,
 Komm noch oft, erwunschter Tag.
 Dass uns, Werter, dein Gedeihen
 Lange, lange Zeit erfreuen
 Und dich selbst ergoten mag.

(Christian Friedrich Henrici, 'Picander'
 "Ernst-, scherzhafte und satyrische
 Gedichte", Teil 2, Leipzig 1729)

Not all scholars agreed with Smend, and Alfred Durr ^{*6} preferred the original suggestion made by Pirro, which had also been supported by another eminent Bach scholar Arnold Schering.^{*7} It seems to have occurred to none of them that the music Bach set to both these identically scanning poems might have been one and the same; which would have explained why each text worked well, and considerably better than the parody version in the *Ascension Oratorio*.

Friedrich Smend made a very strong case, however, for two other movements in BWV 11 being parodies.^{*8} He suggested that the two arias of the oratorio were taken from another lost work, the wedding serenade *Auf! süß entzuckende Gewalt* (with a text by Johann Christoph Gottsched) which was performed on 27 November 1725. The first of these, the Alto aria *Ach bleibe doch* (no. 4) has an identical poetic scansion to the aria for the character of *Die Natur (Nature)* in the wedding cantata: *Entfernet euch, ihr kalten Herzen*. The music of this will be familiar to any lover of Bach's choral works; but it is unlikely that this is the original of the *Agnus Dei* in the *B Minor Mass* as once thought by Spitta, Schweitzer and others. It is, in fact, likely that they both derive from the early 1725 version in the lost wedding serenade. The aria in the *Ascension Oratorio* is longer than that in the *B Minor Mass*, is more developed, containing more decorative phrases, and features a middle section (bb 29 – 46) which does not occur in the other, more severe, version. One possibility is that Bach thoroughly revised the aria for its inclusion here in the *Ascension Oratorio*, and reverted to the original form when he was completing the *B Minor Mass* in the late 1740s. ^{*9}

The Soprano aria *Jesu deine gnadenblicke* (no. 10) may well be based on the aria *Unschuld, kleinode reiner Seelen* from the same 1725 serenade. This is sung by the character of *Die Schamhaftigkeit (Modesty)*. It is unusual in that it dispenses with a

continuo Bass line. In this respect it is similar to the Soprano aria *Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben* in the *St Matthew Passion*, which is orchestrated for 1 Flute and 2 Oboes da caccia. There is a similar instrumentation here (2 Flutes and 1 Oboe) – and it is clear from the manuscript full score that Bach’s original heading at the top of the page was for an exactly identical instrumentation. His corrections are clearly visible, in which he adds ‘2’ to the Flute description, and deletes ‘*da caccia*’ from the oboe marking. The bass line is taken by unison violins and violas, which Smend convincingly describes as Bach’s pictorial method of depicting guiltlessness and a lack of earthly fetters – the aria in each of the relevant works having that as their theme. Bach also made use of this same upper sonority in the opening section of the duet *So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen* in the *St Matthew Passion* in order to represent a similar state of unearthly purity; and he set this in stark contrast to the very worldly cries from the chorus accompanied by full orchestra.

The overall shape of the oratorio is that of a standard cantata, which is how it came to be mistaken as such when it was catalogued by Professor S. W. Dehn as Cantata BWV 11 in the Bach Gesellschaft Edition of 1853. It follows closely the shape of one of the individual component cantatas which make up the *Christmas Oratorio*, with large choruses framing a central section containing biblical narrative, accompanied recitatives, arias and chorales. In fact, the two accompanied recitative sections, nos. 3 & 8, are very reminiscent of parts of the *Christmas Oratorio*, which was composed only a year or so earlier, and first performed at Christmas and New Year 1734-5. The instrumentation of 2 flutes and continuo accompanying a solo voice is found in nos. 27 and 32 in Part 3 of the *Christmas Oratorio*.

The New Testament account of the Ascension is taken from the gospels of St Luke, St Mark, and the Acts of the Apostles. Such a gathering of different biblical texts has a historical precedent in the works of Heinrich Schütz and other composers of the 17th century *Historia* genre. Schütz’s *The Resurrection Story (Historia der Auferstehung Jesu Christi)* unites all of the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection, even when they are apparently at variance with one another, and recounts them in a chronological order that was originally prepared for the Dresden composer Antonio Scandello in 1568. As with the *Christmas Oratorio* the role of Evangelist is written for a Tenor voice accompanied by keyboard and ‘cello continuo. They are joined by a second voice (Bass) at the words of the ‘two Angels in white’, in an imitative duet that once again recalls such moments (the False Witnesses, the Priests) in the *St Matthew Passion*, but which also derives ultimately from the 17th century *Historia* of which Schutz’s *The Resurrection Story* is such a prime example.

The poet who provided the verse for the arias and choruses is unknown, but may have been the same poet, Picander, mentioned above to whom Bach often turned for parodies of this kind, as well as for original texts. He probably collaborated with Bach a year earlier on the *Christmas Oratorio*, but is best known for producing the free verse for the *St Matthew Passion*.

The chorales, as in all of Bach’s cantatas, are carefully selected verses from the large corpus of tunes and texts in use in the Lutheran church over the previous two centuries. Movement no. 6 *Nun lieget alles unter dir* is the fourth verse of Johann Rist’s hymn *Du Lebensfurst, Herr Jesu Christ* set to the melody *Ermuntre dich mein schwacher Geist* by

Johann Schop, first published in 1641. Bach also used this in the second part of the *Christmas Oratorio* (no. 12) although in its normal rhythm in common time. The closing chorale *Wann soll es doch geschehen* (no. 11) is the last verse of Gottfried Wilhelm Sacer's *Gott führet auf gen Himmel*, set to the melody *Von Gott will ich nicht lassen* – itself a version of an earlier secular song *Ich ging einmal spazieren* – first published in 1572. Bach used this chorale tune and variants of it in many other cantatas, particularly nos. 73, 107 and 220. *10

EDITORIAL PROCEDURE

TEXT

The German text has been completely newly translated. The biblical translations (movements 2, 5, 7 & 9) are freely based on the text of the Authorised Version of the King James Bible. The German text is shown as it is found in both the BG and NBA with the exception of Chorale no. 11 which retains the more usual spelling found both in the BG and in the contemporary Leipzig hymnbook, the *Vopelisches Gesangbuch* (1737).

MUSIC

The musical text of this *performing* edition is derived from all the available sources: the manuscripts, the *Bach Gesellschaft Edition* (1853), the *Neuen Bach-Ausgabe* (1975 & 1983), and the *Stuttgarter Bach-Ausgaben* (1996). When the NBA edition was prepared in 1975 the whereabouts of the m/s parts was unknown. They had been moved for safe-keeping during the Second World War, and only resurfaced later in Krakow, Poland. A subsequent edition was brought out in 1983, which included all of the important new material that this complete set of instrumental and vocal parts revealed.

The 1853 BG edition was prepared by Siegfried Wilhelm Dehn and based on earlier work done by one of the founding fathers of the Bach-Gesellschaft, Moritz Hauptmann. On publication it was the first item in the society's second volume dedicated to the entire canon of Bach's works. The editor of the NBA, Paul Brainard, is scathing about the quality of scholarship done on this work, since its many mistakes have been perpetuated in all subsequent editions.*11 These included the Eulenberg Score edited by Arnold Schering (1925), the Hanssler-Verlag edited by Paul Horn (1961) and many others. Since its publication in 1983 the NBA has necessitated a revision of all these previous editions; and indeed Paul Horn's edition, now published by the *Stuttgarter Bach-Ausgaben*, has been thoroughly revised in collaboration with the Bach-Archiv, Leipzig, although it does not agree entirely with the findings of the NBA, choosing to retain the original movement numbering of the BG as well as its textual underlay in no.11 at bars 54-6.

One of the new readings in the NBA which is of particular importance, and which is regarded as a particular fault in the BG, is the reinstatement of an important linking phrase in the continuo part in the second half of bar 18, in movement no. 7. The BG has this movement coming to a full close in D major, followed by a final barline. Brainard is careful to point out that Dehn stated in his foreword that he had consulted his sources conscientiously ('*Wo ausser der Partitur Originalstimmen vorhanden waren, sind auch diese gewissenhaft zu Rathe gezogen worden*').*12 He finds it remarkable that Dehn missed out the linking material, and thus made the next bar the beginning of a new movement (no. 8). Other new readings which improve on the BG include the vocal bass

line in no. 11 bar 59; decorations to the solo vocal line in no. 4; and better textual underlay in many places, but particularly in no. 6.

This edition follows the *Stuttgarter Bach-Ausgaben* by retaining the old BG numbering, and treats nos. 7, 8 & 9 as separate units for bar-numbering purposes. The restored linking material is shown in bar 18 of no. 7 and only a double barline separates this from the *segue* no. 8. Whereas the NBA follows its usual practice of treating movements 7-9 as one continuous movement, the present editor feels that the old numbering clearly defines which sections are biblical recitative and which are non-biblical *accompanied recitativo*. This has been the New Novello Edition's practice in other such situations (the movement numbers in the *St Matthew* and *St John Passion* for example).

THE REHEARSAL PIANO ACCOMPANIMENT

This edition is provided with a new rehearsal accompaniment in which the material based on instrumental parts is in normal-size type and editorial realisation of the figured bass is in cue-size. It endeavours to embrace all of the orchestration, although it has not been possible to preserve every part at the correct pitch: but in this I am consistent with every other edition currently available. Figures have been given for all of the chords in the *secco* Recitative sections.

THE ORCHESTRAL SCORE AND PARTS

The score and parts, available on hire, have been completely newly set and correspond exactly with this vocal score. All movement numbers and bar-numbers agree with each other. Thus there will be no problem in rehearsal for every performer to identify a given passage. The Continuo parts (*Keyboard* and *'Cello/Bass'*) contain the full text of the Recitatives, whilst the other instrumental parts contain such word-cues as are helpful.

The orchestral parts may be used for both 'period' instrument and 'modern' instrument performances.

Trumpets and Timpani Trumpet 1 requires a virtuoso player. The 2nd part is fairly demanding, but 3rd part is less so. The timpani are tuned to A and D.

Flute & Oboes Bach's requirements are for 2 flutes and 2 oboes.

Strings The string parts contain all the cues that will be helpful. Care has been taken over the positioning of page-turns.

Cello / Double Bass (Violone) A single part is provided which is also used by the *'cello continuo*. It will be left to the individual performer or conductor to decide in which arias the Double Bass (Violone) will play. In the *secco* recitatives it is clearly marked where the *'cello continuo* plays alone.

Bassoon There is no separate bassoon part. If required, the performer should use the *Cello/Bass* part. It will be left to the individual performer or conductor to decide at what point the Bassoon should play.

Keyboard Continuo This is the part from which the continuo should be played. The vocal score, though furnished with figures in the Recitativos, is no adequate substitute since the rest of its keyboard part is a piano reduction for rehearsal purposes. The *Keyboard Continuo* part contains such figures as appear in the m/s sources (particularly

the m/s *organ* part), and a new realisation which will be of enormous assistance to those not used to improvising from the figured bass.

EDITORIAL MARKINGS

All editorial markings are shown in brackets with the exception of editorial slurs which have a line through them (cut-slurs).

Dynamics Bach used dynamics sparingly in the *Ascension Oratorio*. They occur in no. 10, for example, in order to differentiate between an instrumental ritornello and an accompanying passage. Editorial dynamics have been included in square brackets where they will be of assistance.

Neil Jenkins

Hove, March 2004

1. Neil Jenkins, Preface to J.S. Bach Christmas Oratorio, London 1999
& Neil Jenkins, Preface to J.S. Bach Easter Oratorio, London 2003
2. Philipp Spitta, Johann Sebastian Bach, Leipzig 1873-80, London 1889
3. Albert Schweitzer, J.S. Bach, Leipzig 1905, London 1911
4. Andre Pirro, L'Esthetique de Jean Sebastian Bach, Paris 1907
5. Friedrich Smend, Bachs Himmelfarts-Oratorium, [Bach-Gedenkschrift 1950] Zurich 1950
6. Alfred Durr, Der Eingangssatz zu Bachs Himmelfahrts-Oratorium und sein Vorlage
[Hans Albrecht in Memoriam] Kassel 1962
7. Arnold Schering, J.S.Bach Himmelfarts-Oratorium 'Einführung', Halle 1925
8. Friedrich Smend, op.cit.
9. John Butt, Bach Mass in B Minor, Cambridge 1991
& Christoph Wolff, Bach, Essays on his life and music, Cambridge Massachusetts 1991
10. Norman Carrell, Bach the borrower, London 1967
11. Paul Brainard, Himmelfarts-Oratorium Kritische Bericht, Kassel 1987
12. Paul Brainard op. cit (page 39)