

Bach Easter Oratorio BWV 249 (Novello edition ed. N. Jenkins)

HISTORY AND ORIGINS OF THE WORK

Bach composed many pieces of celebratory music during his time in Leipzig. Some were Birthday Odes for members of the ruling family. As these were only destined to receive one performance it is not surprising to find movements from them reappearing in the church cantatas which he had to provide each week for the St. Thomas choir. Thus a large work like the *Christmas Oratorio* is principally made up out of at least 3 celebratory birthday cantatas.¹ Bach knew a good thing when he saw it, and was determined to find a new home for some of the large-scale choral and orchestral movements into which he had put so much creative effort.

In the case of the *Easter Oratorio* it is even likely that he planned a dual use for this music from the inception, since he makes use of all the movements in sequence in his reworking of it as church cantata. It started life as a secular birthday cantata for Christian, Duke of Sachs-Weißenfels with the opening text *Entfliehet, verschwindet, entweicht, ihr Sorgen* [BWV 249a] and was performed on 23rd February 1725. As with all of these cantatas (including the *Christmas Oratorio* ones) it started and ended with loud celebratory movements employing the town's trumpeters and drums, of which the last one called for a full chorus as well. These pieces were sometimes performed in the open air, where such an instrumentation was particularly effective. Very soon afterwards the music reappeared with a new, sacred, text as the cantata on Easter Sunday, April 1st 1725, where the original festal scoring was equally appropriate. Some scholars believe that the new text was also planned early, and postulate Picander (the Leipzig poet who provided Bach with so many cantata texts as well as the *St. Matthew Passion* text) as its author². The NBA prints this version, with both sacred and secular texts, as an Appendix to its edition of the oratorio (Anhang B).

Bach reused the music for a second secular purpose on 25th August 1726, with yet another text by Picander, *Verjaget, zerstreuet, zerrüttet ihr Sterne* [BWV 249b], as a celebratory birthday cantata for Count Joachim Friedrich von Flemming.³ This version is now lost.

The work underwent further revision during Bach's tenure as Cantor in Leipzig. A major reworking of the piece was in the mid-1730s, when he revised it once more in its sacred version and gave it the title "*Oratorium*" by which it is now best known. Some of the changes he made are very minor, and may reflect the differing instrumental forces he had available to him at that period by reallocating the instrumental obbligati to different players. Some are slight reworkings of the literary text (the soprano aria text was improved, as is shown in Anhang A of the NBA), or the vocal underlay (particularly the choral bass line to the final chorus). A more significant change was the addition of five

expressive bars (bb. 68 - 72) at the end of the middle section of the Alto aria no. 8. The extent of these changes can be seen in the facsimile plates included in the NBA. A further change occurred in the late 1730s or 1740s when the first movement, which had originally been a tenor and bass duet, was given choral parts as well. It seems that, at this time, Bach was intent on providing a library of music for the churches major festivals to meet his future needs, so that he could be free to move on to other creative forms, such as *Die Kunst der Fuge* and the *Clavier-Übung III*. It is significant that the three works bearing the title “Oratorium” - the *Christmas Oratorio* [BWV 248] and *Ascension Oratorio* [BWV 11] as well as the reworking of this work - all date from the same period of concentrated activity in 1734/5.

Unlike the *Passions* and the *Christmas Oratorio* there is no Gospel text. The recitatives, which are where you would expect to find the Easter story unfolded in biblical narrative, are also the work of the librettist. At one stage in an early manuscript the four soloists were identified with the characters in the Gospel narrative, with Peter and John being the tenor and bass, and the two Marias the soprano and alto. But these identities were dropped in the final manuscript. It seems that there was no time in the Leipzig Easter Day service for a cantata longer than the normal weekly one. Philipp Spitta, in an effort to account for the lack of Gospel narrative given to an Evangelist’s voice, discovered that in the morning service at Leipzig on Easter Day “... there was only time for a piece of music on the scale of a cantata, which was not allowed to be in two parts either, as the Sanctus still had to be performed after the sermon. As Bach could not compose the gospel account to the extent that would have seemed desirable to him and to which it had been dealt with by Vopelius (in his “*Neu Leipziger Gesangbuch*”) he might have preferred the form of an Italian oratorio, which carries different expectations from the start, to taking a fragment out of the gospel account.”⁴

So this work, whilst being a reflection of the Easter events in the Garden at the empty tomb, has no time to expand on them in the same way that, say, Heinrich Schütz had in his “*The Resurrection Story*” [*Auferstehungs-Historia*] in the previous century. It remains in essence therefore, despite its title, a cantata rather than an oratorio.

EDITORIAL PROCEDURE

TEXT

The German text has been completely newly translated. There are places in the arias (particularly bb. 30-31, 48-49 of no. 4 and elsewhere) where I have found that Bach’s original underlay, or the word-underlay in the secular version, suits the English version best.

MUSIC

The musical text of this *performing* edition is derived from the manuscript, the *Neuen Bach-Ausgabe* and the *Stuttgarter Bach-Ausgaben* and represents Bach’s final version. I have also consulted the *Neuen Bach-Ausgabe* for a comparison with the musical text of the original versions of the Arias and Choruses in BWV 249a, and to compare the changes Bach made to the vocal text and its underlay. The vocal bass-line in no. 10 observes all the changes made in the 1730s. Likewise the Adagio section of no. 1 includes all the appoggiaturas inserted at a later stage into the string parts.

The layout of the first vocal movement, *no. 2 Duet & Chorus*, is given in such a way that bb. 24-96 can be used for either a Duet performance or a choral performance. There are, in fact, 3 ways of performing this movement, which are all valid and may have been employed by Bach at one time or another:

- a) As a tenor and bass duet throughout (the earliest version from 1725)
- b) As a tenor and bass duet from the beginning until bar 184 where the chorus enters (this is how it is shown in the Bach Gesellschaft edition and in all subsequent versions derived from it, such as Breitkopf and Härtel's.)

N.B. This was a solution proposed by the editor Wilhelm Rust in volume XXI of the Bach- Gesellschaft Edition, as a compromise between the earliest and last-known reworking of the movement by Bach. This is how it has been most often performed until the arrival of the NBA. Whether Bach ever performed it like this himself is harder to determine: but it would certainly have been possible to use the revised vocal parts with the existing material in this way. The editor's preference is for this composite version, inasmuch as it introduces us first to the two protagonists, Peter and John, running to the tomb; and then introduces the chorus of Believers at the 'da capo'. However, by the time of his last performances (which Alfred Dürr places during the last decade of Bach's life) Bach only retained the middle portion of the movement as a vocal duet (version c).

- c) The last revision, as a choral sandwich, with the choir singing bb. 24-96 and 184-256 and the tenor and bass duet singing the middle section (bb. 120-160) only. This is how it is shown in the NBA, how Andrew Parrott has recorded it on his 1994 *Veritas* label recording, and possibly represents Bach's final solution.

An extra movement is contained in an Appendix at the end. This is a Chorale, which may prove useful in performance, to provide a fitting climax to a work which otherwise ends rather abruptly. The cantata has no concluding chorale, unlike Bach's other Eastertide cantatas, BWV 6, 31, 66, 145 and 158. Although this, in itself, is not exceptional (there are other Bach cantatas which contain no chorale) it is impossible to tell now whether a suitable standard well-known chorale was inserted at this point. As none of the other Easter cantatas contained a chorale in D major using three trumpets and timpani which could furnish an appropriate ending, I have followed the suggestion of Diethard Hellman 6 by using the closing chorale from Cantata 130 "*Herr Gott, dich loben alle wir*" transposed up a tone, and with a German text from the Easter hymn "*Weil unser Trost, der Herre Christ, an diesem Tag erstanden ist*" by Peter von Hagen. This chorale is orchestrated for the same precise forces required by the Easter Oratorio, and although originally in C major it provides a suitably festal ending for those occasions when it is deemed appropriate to end the work in a more final way. For an English translation I have used 2 verses of the well-known Easter Hymn "*The strife is o'er, the battle won*" (17th century, tr. Francis Pott). The chorale melody is a compound time version of the Old Hundredth (better known as *All people that on earth do dwell*), and in this context ends the oratorio with the same style and elan with which Britten closes the first part of his oratorio "*St. Nicolas*".

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.

Recorders There are 2 parts, which only play in the tenor aria no. 6.

Flute At a late stage Bach introduced a flute, and changed some of the instrumentation accordingly. In the Adagio section of *Sinfonia* no.1 it replaced the solo oboe. In the soprano aria no. 4, which is in B minor, we find Bach preferring the obbligato to be played by a flute rather than by a violin, as he did in the "Benedictus" of the B Minor Mass. Either instrument is equally suitable and is allowed for in the m/s.

Oboes Bach's requirements are for 2 oboes, with the first doubling *oboe d'amore* in the alto aria no. 8. Oboe 1 also has the music for the Adagio section of *Sinfonia* no. 1, for those occasions when it will not be played by the flute.

Strings The string parts contain all the cues that will be helpful. The optional violin solo in soprano aria no. 4 is included in the violin 1 part, for those occasions when it will not be played by the flute. Violin 1 & 2 are marked *con sordino* in tenor aria no. 6. 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* player. It will be left to the individual performer or conductor to decide in which arias the Bass (Violone) will play. In the *secco* recitatives it is clearly marked where the *'cello continuo* plays alone.

Bassoon This part is similar to the above, apart from the fact that the bassoon has a solo obbligato at bb. 85-121 of *Sinfonia* no.1. It will be left to the individual performer or conductor to decide in which arias 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 Recitatives, is no adequate substitute since the rest of its keyboard part is a piano reduction for rehearsal purposes. The *Keyboard Continuo* part contains the such figures as appear in the m/s, 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 *Easter Oratorio*. Although they can mean what we expect them to mean - as in Chorus no. 2 bars 2-4, and 252-254 where they indicate a sudden change of dynamic to *piano* followed by a *forte* - they can also indicate the difference between an orchestral ritornello and an accompanying passage, viz. Aria no.8 bars 13, 16, 20, 36 etc. Editorial dynamics have been included in square brackets where they will be of assistance.

Neil Jenkins
Hove, May 2003

1. Neil Jenkins, Preface to "Bach Christmas Oratorio", New Novello Choral Edition (London, 1999)
 2. Werner Neumann, "Bach, Sämtliche Kantatentexte" (Leipzig, 1974)
 3. Oxford Composer Companions, ed. Malcolm Boyd (Oxford, 1999)
 4. Spitta, "Bach" vol.II (Leipzig, 1880)
 5. Dürr "Zur Chronologie der Leipziger Vokalwerke J.S. Bachs", Bach-Jahrbuch 1957
 6. Diethard Hellman, Preface to "J.S. Bach Oster-Oratorium", Carus Edition (Stuttgart, 1992)
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