

Bach *Magnificat in E flat*
(Novello edition ed. N. Jenkins)

Programme Note

Bach's D major Magnificat has long been known as one of his finest short choral works and is frequently performed on festive occasions. His earlier version of the work, in the key of E flat major, is no mere transposition and deserves to be better known.

The history of this work begins with Bach's first year in Leipzig as Thomaskantor, when he composed it as the main new work for performance on Christmas Day, 1723. Consisting of twelve movements, and with four added interpolations - the Laudes or 'Lauds' not belonging to this portion of St. Luke's Gospel - the Magnificat, despite its concision, is double the length of his normal weekly cantatas; and with it the new Thomaskantor was obviously intending to impress his new employers and congregation.

Its structure and tonal plan are satisfyingly symmetric and have long been admired by scholars. The choruses are followed by three groups of solo movements in related keys, the last of which is always for an increasing number of singers (thus no. 3 is a solo, no. 6 is a duet and no. 10 is a trio.) In order to break up an otherwise long sequence of arias he introduces the Chorus at movement no. 4 to sing two appropriate words detached from the previous aria : 'omnes generationes' (*all generations*). But Bach is able to craft this into 27 bars of majestic counterpoint leading to a splendid climax on a chord of a dominant ninth at bar 24, which, in the earlier version being performed tonight, he leaves boldly unresolved. Movement no. 10 employs the *tonus peregrinus*, to which the *Magnificat* was traditionally chanted, as an instrumental counterpoint to the voices. Movement no. 11, *Sicut locutus est*, with its mention of 'our forefathers, Abraham and his seed' inspired Bach to look back at the music of his predecessors in Leipzig, such as the composer whom he had so recently succeeded - Johann Kuhnau (1660-1722) - and is written in an old-fashioned *a capella* fugal style which would have been familiar to earlier congregations. The lesser doxology '*Gloria Patri et Filio*' brings the work back to its home key; and at the words '*sicut erat in principio*' (*as it was in the beginning*) Bach enjoys one of his musical jokes by reintroducing the music of the work's opening bars. Although this musical device was not unknown to baroque composers, the appositeness of the text at this point would have appealed to Bach. The composition is full of such delightful word-painting : '*dispersit*' is vigorously '*scattered*'; '*exaltavit*' and '*deposuit*' graphically depict '*rising*' and '*falling*'; and, in the closing bars of Movement no. 6 the words '*timentibus eum*' (*them that fear him*) are sung to a plangent repeated note which suggests intensely controlled nervousness.

A Leipzig Christmas custom was the introduction of 4 *Laudes* into the Latin text of the *Magnificat*. These had been a feature of Kuhnau's settings, and Bach follows his precedent by setting the same four texts. However, the fact that they are grouped together

at the back of the manuscript (where the last page is sadly missing) with indications in the score as to where they should be placed, seems to indicate that they were not originally planned as part of the work, but added as an afterthought. Whether this was as a result of Bach being obliged to bow to the established precedent, or abandoning an early plan to use material already written by Kuhnau - or whether it was in deliberate homage to it - we shall not know for certain.

Because the last page of the manuscript is missing, we do not know for certain how the fourth Laud ended. For this new edition it was important to attempt a reconstruction; and so I am indebted to Alfred Dürr, who in his preface to the *Bärenreiter Urtext* revealed that the continuo part to the Duet '*Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe*' (Cantata 110) was very nearly identical to the continuo part of this Laud, - albeit in a different key. Studying it closely showed how it could be used to provide a suitable, and completely Bachian, ending. Since the last 4 bars of the Duet are identical to the opening 4 bars, that leaves a mere 11 bars where, as editor, I have had to exercise discretion as to the shape of the vocal lines. Using the clues contained in the last extant bars of the *Magnificat*, which imply that a repeated musical motif was being set up, I have followed the broad outline of Bach's own vocal lines in Cantata 110. That just leaves two bars where I have had to adapt this downwardly transposed material, - and of these I am pleased to be able to say that only a couple of beats of the music are not absolutely by Bach.

Neil Jenkins

1. Chorus "Magnificat"
My soul doth magnify the Lord
2. Soprano 1 Aria "Et exsultavit"
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
- 1st Laud "Vom Himmel hoch"
*From highest heaven I come on earth with tidings of a Saviour's birth.
The joyful tidings which I bring should make Mankind rejoice and sing.*
3. Soprano 2 Aria "Quia respexit"
For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden.
For behold from henceforth, shall call me blessed -
4. Chorus "Omnes generationes"
All generations.
5. Bass Aria "Quia fecit mihi magna"
For he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his name.
- 2nd Laud "Freut euch und jubiliert"
*Gladly rejoice today; to Bethlehem take your way,
Where ye shall find the holy boy that shall be your promised hope and joy.*
6. Alto & Tenor Duet "Et misericordia"
And mercy is on them that fear him, throughout all generations.
7. Chorus "Fecit potentiam"
He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud

in the imagination of their hearts.

3rd Laud “Gloria in excelsis Deo”

*Glory now be to God in the highest, and on earth be peace,
And goodwill be unto all men.*

8. Tenor Aria “Deposuit potentes”

He hath put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble
and meek.

9. Alto Aria “Esurientes”

He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty
away.

4th Laud “Virga Jesse”

*Jesse’s stem is flowering, our promised Emmanuel proffering.
Human form, so meek and mild, is taken by this holy child. Alleluia.*

10. Trio “Suscepit Israel”

He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel

11. Chorus “Sicut locutus est”

As he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever.

12. Chorus “Gloria”

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.
Amen