

Philip Loos
Jeffery Thomas
T.A. Steve Lehning

The Effect of the Lyrical and Musical Reciprocation in Bach Cantatas 106 and 80

Johann Sebastian Bach was an 18th century composer, not a theologian, yet there are few men in the history of the world who have so thoroughly captured God's character and even fewer still who have so passionately impressed that character upon men's hearts. While the music or lyrics of his cantatas alone are often enough to stir a man to action or reduce him to tears, it is the relationship between the two that truly seems to reflect all that encompasses God's greatness. Two of Bach's most renowned cantatas, "Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit" (BWV 106) and "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" (BWV 80), are prime examples of this. The two have few similarities and yet they seem to bookend much of who God is. With these pieces, Bach succeeds in a task where most composers cannot: creating a perfect relationship between music and lyrics. Through this relationship, he succeeds where most *theologians* cannot: transforming this perfect God from one who is simply feared, to one who is revered *and* adored in the hearts of men.

The first written of the two cantatas, "Gottes Zeit ist allerbeste Zeit" (BWV 106), was most likely written by Bach in August of 1707 in Mühlhausen, during his earliest years of composition. It is different from his later cantatas in that it does not contain recitative or separate *da capo* arias for he had not yet been influenced by the popular Italian style. Instead, it was influenced solely by German hymns. Furthermore, each section of the cantata flows right into the next instead of having separate movements of sorts, which is more suitable for the occasion, for it is widely assumed that it was written for a funeral, presumably that of his uncle, Tobias

Lämmershirt. Since it was written for a funeral and is one of his earlier works, nearly all the text is based on the Scriptures, although who compiled the texts is subject to argument. Some have suggested Bach himself, since so few of the lines required original poetic or literary thought. In any case, it was not Bach's primary task to write the lyrics, but to match a style of music with those lyrics. He does so masterfully. Bach opens the piece with a slow string (viola da gambas) and continuo sonatina in 4/4 time, which is very pastoral and peaceful. Following the strings intro is a beautiful recorder duet adding to the tenderness and gentleness of the piece. The two recorder parts are very close to each other sometimes moving apart from unison ever so slightly so as to get an effect that the two are being interwoven forming a long chord or rope, perhaps signifying that life does not end with death but only begins. It is not a sad piece written for a funeral, it is instead more empathetic and soothing, reminding us that death of a loved one is painful for us but for the one who has died, it is only the beginning. After the introductory sonatina there is a 4 part chorus reminding us that it is God's choosing when we should go and that the time of his choosing is always best. It starts at a moderate pace in 4/4 time but soon picks up pace and changes to 3/8. It is here where Bach seems to first really use the music to emphasize the lyrics. During the line "in ihm leben, weben und sind wir" meaning "in him living, **moving**, we exist" as taken from Acts 17 and 28 (Koster 1995) there is a great deal of movement in the voices. Directly after this the soprano sings "solange er will" meaning "so **long** as he wills" and holds out the word solange for 3 measures. All of this is performed in a major key but as soon as the final line about death is sung – "In him shall we die at the right time, when he wills" – it becomes minor and the ending of the Coro is left unresolved suggesting that death is not the end. This leads into the Tenor Arioso who ponders the inevitability of our death, with verses from Psalm 90, in a minor key, but when he says that the realization of this fact will give

us wisdom (an optimistic insight) it again switches to major key. Continuing directly after the tenor finishes is the bass aria telling us to prepare for this inevitable death. He repeats over and over to “bestelle dein Haus” or “Set ready thine house” (Isaiah 38) and during this time, the flute is very active, giving us the impression that the flute itself is hurriedly busy getting its own house ready. A beautiful coro section follows, staying on the theme of death’s inevitability but now using verses from Sirach, a book of the apocrypha. It starts off with the bass, tenor and alto fugally singing “This is the ancient law; man, thou must perish” but then an angelic soprano voice which seems to be reaching higher and higher as it longs for Christ says “Yes, come Lord Jesus!” Then together they sing and continue to crescendo until a dramatic and sudden silence leaves the chilling soprano voice alone to sing a haunting ending to the chorus section. In the following aria, the first line of the two sections is interesting because each is something Christ said on the cross. In the first alto aria, it starts as saying “Into thine hands now do I commit my soul”, just as Christ said right before his death. This is in minor key but Bach does not leave it at that and reminds us that He “hast redeemed me, Lord, thou my faithful God” and uses a major key to emphasize once again his optimism. Then, the opening line of the bass and alto arioso, “This day shalt thou with me in paradise be”, also happens to be what Christ said to the thief who was crucified next to Christ. This line, as the voice of Christ often is, is sung by the bass and simply repeated over and over as the alto soothingly sings of the assurance and peace we have in Christ (Luke 23). The cantata ends with choral lines lauding praise upon the trinity, each of which is echoed by the recorders. Then the final line breaks apart from this theme into a fugal, uplifting style to emphasize that our triumph over death is “through Jesus Christ, Lord, Amen.” At this cantata’s conclusion one cannot help but have deep admiration for the insight Bach brings to the relationship between our two lives, one that must end and the other that is eternal and the

brief separation between the two: death. But even more so, one is astonished by the brilliance with which he fuses this insight with his musical talent all at age 22. It is truly a masterpiece.

Another of Bach's cantatas, one which is probably more recognizable to the general public because of its continued use today as a church hymn, is BWV 80, or, "Ein feste Burg is unser Gott". This piece is in stark contrast to the previously discussed cantata in that it does not dwell on God's grace and mercy as it does on His power, strength and inevitable destruction of Satan's realm. Bach wrote it in Weimar for the yearly Reformation Festival in October of 1715 and revised it in 1723 in Leipzig. The lyrics were written by Martin Luther, the famous man who sparked the Protestant Reformation. Although it was written for this specific event, it would have been something that was recognizable by a congregation. However, the additions Bach makes to the original scoring and text would have shocked and pleased them. The piece opens mightily, with the tenor nearly shouting in fortissimo "Ein feste Burg" with the first two notes being not only the same to emphasize the power, but also the peak. The lyrics for the opening "coro" focus on God being a shield from Satan who is out to fell us. The music is confident that He will "help us free from every need" for it uses trumpets to express his regality and strong bass notes to show power. And of course Bach, as he did with "Gottes Zeit", uses minor and major to emphasize good vs. evil or sadness vs. joy. He does so right away in line 5 for it goes from major key expressing God's might to minor and expressing the evil one's "grim intent" and "vast might and deceit", then right back to major as God will in the end have the victory. Finally, in the opening chorus, it is important to note the elaboration of the parts which would have made this tune, to which many would have nearly become numb, something that would have excited them. The second part is an aria scored for bass and soprano and it begins with fast violin suggesting anticipation and excitement. Here the bass begins with what is nearly

a non-stop elaboration of the text as the soprano intermittently sings the familiar melody. The violins play nearly every 8th note keeping the victorious sound constant throughout the aria. The third movement is a recitative sung by the bass, and the mood is in stark contrast to the first two movements. The music is slow, minor and contemplative, just as is the text that asks us to “consider well, o child of God, this love so mighty” and to recognize the sacrifice made to save us from the Devil. Although it is scored for bass and continuo, the continuo in the latter parts of the recitative drops out for much of it leaving the bass almost talking to us as a priest or reverend would. Finally, after the final lines asking us to confess our guilt so we might be united with Christ, the bass continues for a while longer giving us time to contemplate our sins and share our guilt with Him. The fourth part is an aria scored for a soprano. The opening line “come in my heart’s abode” is emphasized by a descending melody leaving us to imagine Christ coming down into our hearts. The third line “drive world and Satan out” is repeated twice as if to be firm and definitive. The fifth movement returns to the powerful melody which is made even more powerful by Bach’s use of unison voices. Again, a switch from major to minor is used to talk about the “grim prince” but returns to confidence in a major key that “one little word can fell him.” The whole movement is very victorious sounding with fast moving oboes and violins, one can almost picture a victors march home to a proud and confident crowd. The sixth part is again the recitative style of preaching; only this time it is the tenor who speaks to us. It is interesting to note that in the recitatives it does not speak in terms of “we” as do the victorious sounding choruses, but in terms of “you” which makes it even more like a sermon, and makes it more of a personal time for contemplation. The seventh part is the tenderest of the movements and is an aria written for alto and tenor. The two parts go in and out of synchronized harmony. In the third line when talking about destroying Satan, the voices and violins crescendo and accelerate

but as it talks about defeating death, the music slows down considerably as if laying death itself to eternal sleep. Then, to bring the piece in a full circle, the eighth and final movement is a 4 part choral movement talking about how everything can be taken from us save for the promise of eternity with him. The movement is made more powerful by the doubling of the voices by the instruments and then in a very climactic and closing way, it ends with the line “his realm is ours forever.” When it finished, the congregation must have wanted to jump out of their seats and give their lives for this great and powerful king, for to hear it so drastically changed would have been a treat. Again, Bach’s mastery in using his music to truly reflect his message is abundantly clear. Its popularity in churches today is a testament to this.

Neither of these two pieces, though uniquely different in style, can be truly enjoyed to their fullest effect if not listened to as historically informed performance. The difference is not as stark in the performance of “Ein feste burg” even though the roundness of the oboe d’amore is noticeable, but it is the tenderness of the viola da gambas and unique sound of the flautos in “Gottes Zeit”, especially in the opening sonatina, that is of paramount importance to the listening experience.

Bach wrote 224 cantatas, and yet through cantatas 80 and 106 alone, he takes us through a rollercoaster of emotions concerning our relationship to God – from confident to mournful, from grateful to revering, from fearful to hopeful and back again. No one man can fully encompass or explain who God is, but it is doubtful that any man so beautifully portrayed as much of Him to mankind as did Bach.

Works Cited

1. Oron, Aryeh. <http://www.bach-cantatas.com>. 2000-2003
2. Koster, Jan. <http://odur.let.rug.nl/Linguistics/diversen/bach/cantatas/comment/106.html>. 1995
3. Thomas, Jeffery. American Bach Soloists Cantatas: Volume III. Koch International, March 1993
4. Ambrose, Z. Philip. <http://www.uvm.edu/~classics/faculty/bach>. 1998