BACH 736 - J.S. BACH: CANTATA 198: TRAUER ODE

Of all Bach's great Cantatas, the composition and performance of this Trauerode was probably the most significant to the composer, the performers and the citizens of Leipzig. In 1697, Friedrich August, Elector of Saxony, assumed the Polish crown, which traditionally passed not through lineage, but on selection by the Polish nobility from eligible candidates. Extensive lobbying by the Saxon Court brought Friedrich August into the Finals, his main opponent being Louis, Prince of Conti. Stories are told of a midnight race from the Polish border to Krakov, then Polish capital. Friedrich August won and claimed the Crown. Louis, so it is said, consoled himself by making off with a substantial part of the Polish Crown Jewels.

In addition to the election competition there remained another challenge: the requirement that any king of Poland must be of Catholic faith. Despite the Elector's, and Saxony's solid Lutheran Protestant background, this was no problem for the opportunist Friedrich August who readily acceded, formally adopting Catholicism in Vienna on June 1st, 1697 despite a storm of protest from the strongly Protestant Saxon populace. Feelings were only slightly calmed by a formal announcement on July 27th that Protestantism in Saxony would in no way be jeopardized, as indeed it would not be. In fact the city of Dresden would be enriched by the juxtaposition of religious buildings of both faiths, often unofficially competing for prominence.

The way was now clear to assume the Crown, and on September 15th 1697 in Krakov, August I, Elector of Saxony, was crowned King August II of Poland. His wife, however, (Princess) Markgräfin Christiane Eberhardine of Brandenburg-Kulmbach whom he had married in 1693, positively refused to renounce her Protestant faith. She went into self-exile in Pretzsch Castle on the Elbe where she remained until her death on September 5th, 1727. Her husband meanwhile favored a long string of mistresses with his sexual prowess, siring only one legitimate heir, but 267 illegitimate offspring, earning him the title of August the Strong (der Starke) and a further measure of popular disregard. The death of Christiane Eberhardine was deeply mourned in strongly-Lutheran Saxony, and it was felt in Leipzig that some special memorial was required.

Hans von Kirchbach, a nobleman student at the University of Leipzig, proposed a memorial service in the Paulinerkirche (University Church) during which he would deliver a valedictory address. Von Kirchbach commissioned a sometime librettist of Bach's, Johann Christoph Gottsched, to write verses for a Mourning Ode, and Bach to set these verses to music.

The scoring of this work is extraordinary. A large and expressive grouping of instruments is used, including the usual complement of violins, violas, two flutes, two oboes and the usual continuo bass and harpsichord, together with a pair of those sweetly sorrowful instruments the oboes d'amore, two violas da gamba and two lutes. This pairing of so many highly contrasted and richly colored instruments is remarkable for Bach's time and must have occasioned considerable amazement and satisfaction, quite aside from the gratifying musical sound. The multiplicity of instruments also indicates the readiness, if not insistence, on the part of every capable musician in the city, to participate. According to the program, the Ode was "set by Herr Bach in the Italian style." Herr Bach conducted the performance from a clavicembalo, among the musicians in the gallery. The ceremony took place on October 17th, 1727. A great catafalque bearing the Queen's emblems stood in the center of the crowded church, and the service began with the ringing of all the bells of the city. The event was reported in Christoph Ernst Sicul's *Das thränende Leipzig*:

"In solemn procession, while the bells were rung, the Town Officials and the Rector and Professors of the University entered St. Paul's, where many others were present, namely, princely and other persons of rank, as well as not only Saxon but also foreign Ministers, Court and other Chevaliers, along with many ladies. When everyone had taken his place, there had been a prelude by the organ, and the Ode of Mourning written by Magister Johann Christoph Gottsched, member of the Collegium Marianum, had been distributed among those present by the Beadles, there was shortly after heard the Music of Mourning, which this time Capellmeister Johann Sebastian Bach had composed in the Italian style, with Clave di Cembalo, which Mr. Bach himself played, also organ, violas di gamba, lutes, violins, recorders, transverse flutes, &c., half being heard before and half after the oration of praise and mourning."

Bach's opening movement fittingly reflects the scene, with a tremendous and solemn chorus of great majesty for the entire choral and instrumental ensemble. The following recitative and aria use the color of the higher strings and the soprano voice for the expression of a noble grief. Then comes a remarkable example of pictorial expression, the tolling of the bells for the Queen. The ringing ceases by degrees, the final sound of the bass acting as cadence figure. An aria and recitative tell how bravely their Queen confronted death. A fugal chorus pays tribute to the Queen, here given the title of *Glaubenspflegerin* – Protector of the Faith. This concludes the First Part. At this point, Von Kirchbach delivered his Obituary Address.

With the opening of the Second Part the pangs of death are conquered and the text is focused on the joy of the life hereafter. The Tenor aria, (8) sees the Queen now received in the "Sapphired Halls". The bass recitative extols her praises, with reference to the great rivers of Saxony and Poland, the Weichsel (Vistula), Dniester, the Elbe and Muth, as well as the Residence at Pretzsch on the Elbe to which the Queen had retired and nearby Torgau, where she spent time while Pretzsch was prepared. Notable is the absence of any reference to Dresden! In the peaceful, yet triumphant Final Chorus, her loyal citizens assure their Queen that she will live forever in their hearts.

1. Opening Chorus

Laß, Fürstin, laß noch einen Strahl Aus Salems Sterngewölben schießen. Und sieh, mit wieviel Tränengüssen Umringen wir dein Ehrenmal! Give one backward glance, O Princess, from Salem's starry Heaven, and see the wealth of tears we shed at thy Memorial.

2. Soprano Recitative

Dein Sachsen, dein bestürztes Meißen Erstarrt bei deiner Königsgruft; Das Auge tränt, die Zunge ruft: Mein Schmerz kann unbeschreiblich heißen! Hier klagt August und Prinz und Land, Der Adel ächzt, der Bürger trauert, Wie hat dich nicht das Volk bedauert, Sobald es deinen Fall empfand! Thy Saxony, thy disturbed Meissen, stand numb beside thy Royal Tomb; The eye doth weep, the tongue cries out: My pain must be without description! Here mourn August and Prince and State, the nobles moan, the citizens sorrow, how much thy folk lamented thee as soon as thy passing was known!

3. Soprano Aria

Verstummt! verstummt, ihr holden Saiten! Kein Ton vermag der Länder Not Bei ihrer teuren Mutter Tod, O Schmerzenswort! recht anzudeuten. Be mute, be mute, ye lovely strings! No sound could give meet expression to the peoples' grief at their dear cherished mother's death... O painful word!

4. Alto Recitative

Der Glocken bebendes Getön Soll unsrer trüben Seelen Schrecken Durch ihr geschwungnes Erze wecken Und uns durch Mark und Adern gehn. O, könnte nur dies bange Klingen, Davon das Ohr uns täglich gellt, Der ganzen Europäerwelt Ein Zeugnis unsres Jammers bringen! The tolling of the trembling bells shall awaken our lamenting souls' great terror through their rebounding bronze and pierce us to our very core. Oh, would that now this anxious peeling, which on our ears each day doth shrill, might render witness of our grief to all the European world!

5. Alto Aria

Wie starb die Heldin so vergnügt! Wie mutig hat ihr Geist gerungen, Da sie des Todes Arm bezwungen, Noch eh er ihre Brust besiegt. How died our Lady so content! How valiantly her spirit struggled, conquering the arm of death ere it finally subdued her breast.

6. Tenor Recitative

Ihr Leben ließ die Kunst zu sterben In unverrückter Übung sehn; Unmöglich konnt es denn geschehn, Sich vor dem Tode zu entfärben. Ach selig! wessen großer Geist Sich über die Natur erhebet, Vor Gruft und Särgen nicht erbebet, Wenn ihn sein Schöpfer scheiden heißt. In her living she exemplified the art of dying with steadfast skill; Impossible that she grow pallid before her death. Ah, blessed! Whose noble soul doth raise itself above our nature, trembling not before crypt and coffin when our Maker calls us to take our leave.

7. Chorus: An dir, du Fürbild Großer Frauen, An dir, erhabne Königin, An dir, du Glaubens-pflegerin, War dieser Großmut Bild zu schauen.

In thee, thou model of great women, in thee, illustrious Royal Queen, in thee, thou keeper of the faith, the form of kindness was to witness.

8. Tenor Aria

Der Ewigkeit saphirnes Haus Zieht, Fürstin, deine heitern Blicke Vor unsrer Niedrigkeit zurücke Und tilgt der Erden Denkbild aus. Ein starker Glanz von hundert Sonnen, Der unsern Tag zur Mitternacht Und unsre Sonne finster macht, Hat dein verklärtes Haupt umsponnen. Eternity's sapphired halls, O Princess, now draw these serene glances from our own low estate, and blot out earth's corrupted form. The brilliant light of a hundred suns make a halo round thy head, so blinding us that it turns our day to mid of night, and our own sun to darkness.

9. Bass Recitative - Arioso - Recitative

Was Wunder ists? Du bist es wert, Du Fürbild aller Königinnen! Du mußtest allen Schmuck gewinnen, Der deine Scheitel itzt verklärt. Nun trägst du vor des Lammes Throne Anstatt des Purpurs Eitelkeit Ein perlenreines Unschuldskleid Und spottest der Verlaßnen Krone. Soweit der volle Weichselstrand, Der Niester und die Warthe

fließet, Soweit sich Elb' und Muld' ergießet, Erhebt dich beides, Stadt und Land. Dein Torgau geht im Trauerkleide, Dein Pretsch wird kraftlos, starr und matt; Denn da es dich verloren hat, Verliert es seiner Augen Weide. What wonder is this? This thou hast earned, thou model of all queens forever! For thou wast meant to win the glory which hath transfigured now thy head. Before the lamb's own throne thou wearest instead of purple's vanity a pearl-white robe of purity and scornest now the forsaken crown. Our City and our State extol thee, as far thy brimming rivers, the Vistula, the Dniester and the Warth, the Elb and the Muld are flowing. Thy Torgau walketh now in mourning, and Pretzsch, thy Residence, is weary, pale and weak, for with thy loss it loses all its vision's rapture.

10. Closing Chorus

Doch, Königin! du stirbest nicht, Man weiß, was man an dir besessen; Die Nachwelt wird dich nicht vergessen, Bis dieser Weltbau einst zerbricht. Ihr Dichter, schreibt! wir wollens lesen: Sie ist der Tugend Eigentum, Der Untertanen Lust und Ruhm, Der Königinnen Preis gewesen. No, Royal Queen! Thou shalt not die; We see in thee our great possession; Posterity shall not forget thee, till all this universe shall fall. Ye poets, write! For we would read it: She hath been virtue's property, her loyal subjects' joy and fame, of Royal Queens the crown and glory.

CANTATA 54: Widerstehe doch der Sünde

Cantata 54 most probably dates from Bach's Weimar days before 1714 and takes as its general theological theme the resistance against sin, which Bach treats with bible-thumping directness. The uncompromising textual descriptions of sin and its consequences are reflected musically in repetitive thumping bases and numerous dissonances. In this particular recording, Hilde Roessel-Majdan gives the key recitative with such feeling and clarity that its message cannot possibly be lost! The concluding movement demonstrates a preference Bach was to retain throughout his cantata-writing: important messages were given fugal treatment.

1. Alto Aria

Widerstehe doch der Sünde, Sonst ergreifet dich ihr Gift. Laß dich nicht den Satan blenden; Denn die Gottes Ehre schänden, Trifft ein Fluch, der tödlich ist.

Stand firm against sin, otherwise its poison seizes hold of you. Do not let Satan blind you; for to desecrate the honor of God meets with a curse, which surely leads to death.

2. Alto Recitative

Die Art verruchter Sünden Ist zwar von außen wunderschön; Allein man muß Hernach mit Kummer und Verdruß Viel Ungemach empfinden. Von außen ist sie Gold; Doch, will man weiter gehn, So zeigt sich nur ein leerer Schatten Und übertünchtes Grab. Sie ist den Sodoms Äpfeln gleich, Und die sich mit derselben gatten, Gelangen nicht in Gottes Reich. Sie ist als wie ein scharfes Schwert, Das uns durch Leib und Seele fährt. The array of despicable sins is indeed from outside very attractive; but they bring only sorrow and frustration and much hardship. From outside Sin is gold, but when you explore more deeply it is but an empty shadow, a whited sepulchre. Sin is like the apples of Sodom, and those who join with it cannot reach God's kingdom. It is like a sharp sword that drives through our body and soul.

Note: Josephus, Bellum Judaicum, IV. 8. 4, writes that apples of Sodom looked like edible fruit, but turned to smoke and ashes when picked.

3. Alto Aria

Wer Sünde tut, der ist vom Teufel, Denn dieser hat sie aufgebracht. Doch wenn man ihren schnöden Banden Mit rechter Andacht widerstanden, Hat sie sich gleich davongemacht. He who commits sins, he is of the Devil, for it is the Devil who has created them. But if one stands firm with true devotion against Sin's despicable bands, He will drive Sin at once away.

CANTATA 106: ACTUS TRAGICUS

From 1727 (Trauerode - Leipzig) to Cantata 54 composed in Weimar pre-1714, we go back yet further in time for our last Cantata, *Actus Tragicus*, another funeral composition probably dating from the late Arnstadt years, 1707-8, although originally thought to be from Weimar. Its short interlinked movements strongly reflect the influence of Buxtehude. The text contrasts the Old Testament fear of death with the New Testament joy in death. As usual with Bach, it is the latter which triumphs in the final chorus.

1. Instrumental Sonatina

2a. Chorus: Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit. In ihm 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 exist, so long as He wills. In Him we die at the right time, when He wills it.

- **2b. Arioso Tenor:** Ach, Herr, lehre uns bedenken, daß wir sterben müssen, auf daß wir klug werden. Oh Lord, teach us to reflect that we must die so that we gain in wisdom.
- **2c. Aria Bass:** Bestelle dein Haus; denn du wirst sterben und nicht lebendig bleiben. Set thy house in order; for thou shallt die and no longer remain among the living.
- **2d. Chorus:** Es ist der alte Bund: Mensch, du mußt sterben! It is the old covenant: Man, thou must die! **Soprano:** Ja, komm, Herr Jesu, komm! Yes, come, Lord Jesus, come!
- **3a. Aria Alto:** In deine Hände befehl ich meinen Geist; du hast mich erlöset, Herr, du getreuer Gott. *Into Thy hands I commit my spirit; Thou hast redeemed me, Lord, Thou faithful God*
- **3b. Arioso Bass:** Heute, heute wirst du mit mir im Paradies sein. *Today thou shallt be with Me in paradise.* **Chorale Alto as duet:** 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 geworden. With peace and joy I journey there, in God's will, confident in my heart and mind, peaceful and calm. As God promised me: death has become my sleep.

4. Chorus

Glorie, Lob, Ehr und Herrlichkeit Sei dir, Gott Vater und Sohn bereit, Dem heilgen Geist mit Namen! Die göttlich Kraft Mach uns sieghaft Durch Jesum Christum, Amen. Glory, praise, honor and majesty be given to Thee God Father and Son, to the Holy Spirit by name! May God's strength make us victorious. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

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For expanded notes on Cantata 198 with illustrations, please see: http://www.BaroqueMusic.org/198trauerode.html