

## BACH 746 - The Complete Orchestral SINFONIAS from Bach's Cantatas

---

The story of Bach's Cantatas begins with his first employment at the age of 18, in August of 1703, when he was appointed Organist to the New Church in Arnstadt having recently dazzled the congregation with his brilliant performance at the dedication of their new organ. While his duties as organist did not require the composition of cantatas, Bach nevertheless produced some of his earliest choral works at this time, including **Cantata 150**: "*Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich – Lord, my soul thirsts for thee*" which may well be his earliest, and the **Easter Cantata 4**: "*Christ lag in Todesbanden - Christ lay by death enshrouded*", possibly composed as a test piece in 1707 when he successfully applied for the position of organist in Mühlhausen. Also significant during his Arnstadt years is the celebrated story of his unauthorized 3-4 month absence in 1705 to hear the famous organist-composer Buxtehude in Lübeck; Bach's earliest Cantatas owe a considerable debt to the inspiration and musical formats of Buxtehude.

Moving to Mühlhausen in July 1707, he produced the **Wedding Cantata 196**. He remained there only a year, after which he accepted a two-fold position as member of the chamber orchestra and organist to the Ducal Court at Weimar. However it was not until several years later that Bach was required to compose cantatas. "*On Friday March 2, 1714, His Serene Highness the Reigning Duke most graciously conferred upon the Court Organist Bach, the title of Concertmaster...*" which entailed the practical duty of producing one new choral composition each month. At last the first major period of Cantata writing was about to begin. The fourth Sunday following his new appointment fell on March 25th, the double feast day of Palm Sunday and Annunciation, and it was for this very special occasion that Bach composed **Cantata 182**: "*Himmelskönig, sei willkommen - King of Heaven, be Thou welcome*". At least 20 Cantatas can be established with reasonable certainty as dating from this period, including the **Christmas Cantata 142**, **Cantatas 12, 18, 21**, and the **Easter Cantata 31**.

Bach's next move was to the small Court of Anhalt-Cöthen, where he took up the position of Capellmeister, the highest rank given to a musician during the Baroque age. The Court was Calvinist, so there was no church music at Cöthen; however, the young Prince enjoyed a cheerful and cultivated style of living complete with secular cantatas and instrumental music featuring the latest styles and fashions. Here Bach would compose much instrumental music, some of which was destined to be used in later compositions including the Cantata Sinfonias.

The Sinfonia from **Cantata 29**, for example, is derived from the Partita for Solo Violin, BWV 1006; the two Sinfonias from **Cantata 35**, opening Part 1 and Part 2 of this lengthy Cantata, are both presumed to derive from a lost Violin Concerto, which Bach later (1730s?) adapted as a Harpsichord Concerto of which only a fragment remains. The Sinfonia from **Cantata 52** is drawn from the First Brandenburg Concerto, while the Sinfonia from **Cantata 174** (Leipzig 1729) is an adaptation of the first movement of the Third Brandenburg Concerto with the addition of 2 horns and 3 oboes. The Sinfonias from **Cantata 146** and **Cantata 156** were both drawn from lost Violin Concertos, later adapted as Harpsichord Concertos in the 1730s (BWV 1052 and 1056 respectively).

When Bach took over as Cantor of the St.Thomaskirche in the spring of 1723, and as the leading musician of the leading Cantorate in Protestant Germany, he achieved at long last the opportunity to realize one of his long-held artistic aspirations: "*the ultimate goal of a regulated church music,*" which he had described in 1708 to the Mühlhausen Town Council and which he had tried to pursue, on a more restricted level, at the Weimar Court. Bach at once embarked on a program to provide a piece of "*concerted music*" - a Cantata - for every Sunday and Feast Day of the Ecclesiastical Year, except for the Lenten Weeks preceding Christmas and Easter, when concerted music was suspended. His first offering, on May 30, 1723, was **Cantata 75**, closely followed by **Cantata 76**, of which the Sinfonia to Part 2 of this work would later appear in a Trio Sonata for Pedal-Harpsichord or Organ (*see our The Six Trio Sonatas on Pedal-harpsichord - BACH 744*)

The Cantata supplied the principal music piece in the liturgy of the main service, and as such it highlighted a passage from the biblical lesson, then interpreted it as well. Thus all of Bach's Leipzig Cantata texts follow a standard pattern firmly grounded in the two-fold structure of a Lutheran sermon: *explicatio* and *applicatio*, biblical text and theological instruction, followed by practical and moral advice. The libretto ordinarily opens with a biblical dictum, usually a passage from the prescribed Gospel lesson that serves as a point of departure (opening chorus). It is followed by scriptural, doctrinal, and contextual explanations (a recitative-aria pair), leading to considerations of the consequences to be drawn from the lesson and the admonition to conduct a true Christian life (another recitative-aria pair). The text concludes with a congregational prayer in the form of a hymn stanza (chorale).

Why Bach should include a Sinfonia in his Cantatas is not clear, since it has no religious significance. It should be remembered, however, that the weekly Church Service was a lengthy affair including music, teaching, and announcements of forthcoming events. It was, without being in any way disrespectful, the townspeople's "Weekly Event", if not weekly entertainment where a Sinfonia would certainly not be out of place. For a composer, the Sinfonia provides a free composition without the pre-determined format of "Concerto" or "Sonata". An incentive might perhaps be a visiting musician of standing – Bach's son recalled that "*no visiting musician of importance would pass through Leipzig without paying respects to my father*". A celebrated visiting oboist for example, might be invited to perform as soloist in the Sunday Cantata, with a specially written (or adapted!) Sinfonia featuring a solo oboe part. In 1730 an alteration to the organ in the Thomaskirche allowed the Rückpositiv to be played separately, giving Bach the opportunity to conduct from the organ. This might have given rise to the two "organ showcase" Sinfonias to **Cantata 29** and **Cantata 146**. The **Easter Oratorio, BWV 249** begins with two Sinfonia movements – with which we end our program; Friedrich Smend supposes these two movements, plus the orchestral

part of the following chorus, to have formed a Concerto.

Music-making in Bach's Leipzig was largely provided by the *Collegia Musica* - secular musical organizations run mainly by the students of the City's famed university – a tradition dating back at least to the preceding century. Many of Leipzig's most famous musicians were connected with the students' musical activities (among them several Thomaskantors) and contributed music of the highest quality. In spring 1729, Bach took over directorship of the *Collegium* founded in 1704 by Telemann. The concerts were given in Zimmermann's Coffee House on the fashionable Catherine Strasse close to the Market Place. That Gottfried Zimmermann was not only a restaurateur and impresario, but also a music-lover and quite possibly a highly competent musician, is indicated by the fact, as confirmed by several contemporary newspaper reports, that he frequently re-equipped his establishment with the latest musical instruments for use by the Collegium and other musical guests. One of his prize possessions in the late 1720s was “a clavicymbel of large size and range of expressivity” which made it a Leipzig attraction in itself. It was replaced by an even finer instrument in 1733. Programs included works by Bach and other fashionable composers. For his own music, Bach drew on early instrumental compositions, and many Sinfonias were to find a new lease of life, often as Harpsichord Concertos.

The assembly of Bach's Cantata Sinfonias on this disc brings to the listener not fortunate enough to possess the complete Cantatas a wealth of instrumental richness which might otherwise never be encountered. The variety and freedom of form, and the wealth of instrumentation make for compelling listening from start to finish. From here the exploring listener might consider our two other CDs in which we present all the opening choruses from Bach's Cantatas (*Soli Deo Gloria* - Vols. 1 & 2: BACH 733 and 734, available separately). It is mainly in the opening movements that Bach sets the tone of the Cantatas. The perfect matching of musical mood to the message of the relevant text shows Bach to have a deep comprehension of the Biblical texts and indeed to be a powerful advocate of the weekly message. It is for this reason that the opening movements and chorale elaborations are among the highest pinnacles of Bach's musical output.

The front cover illustration to our booklet shows “singers and instrumentalists gathered around a harpsichord during a Cantata rehearsal”; though dated 1775, the scene would not have changed in the forty or so years since Bach's days at Leipzig. Bach's rehearsals would have taken place in the large room on the second floor of the Thomas School building which adjoined the Thomas Church as was home to the St Thomas School and Choir – the *Thomanerchor*.

Our back cover illustration shows the actual stringed instruments on which the Leipzig Sinfonias would have been played, instruments which are still in use today. The two violins and cello are the work of Johann Christian Hoffmann (1683-1750), “*Instrument and Lute-maker to the Royal Polish and Saxonian Electorate Court*”. Hoffmann was a highly reputed instrument maker and a well-respected Leipzig citizen. In 1734 Bach entrusted to him maintenance of the stringed instruments belonging to both churches (Nikolai and Thomaskirche). Between 1730 and 1737 Hoffmann built several instruments for the Leipzig Neue Kirche, today in current use in the Thomaskirche. Hoffmann also built, to Bach's design, the Viola Pomposa, a tenor instrument of the violin family which Bach specifies in some of his Cantatas. Returning to the illustration, the viola, unsigned, is ascribed to Josef Pradter, Prague 1712, the Contrabass to an earlier member of the family, Leonhardt Pradter, Prague 1672.

---

A selection of all Bach's finest Cantata Choruses and Chorales is available on 10 Volumes of “*Soli Deo Gloria*”: ORYX - BACH COLLECTION - **BACH 734 - 735** (Vols. 1 & 2) and **BACH 748 - 755** (Vols. 3-10).