

BACH CANTATAS: THE ASCENT

Theatre and opera historian, director, and actor Mark Ringer chose to title his recent book *Bach's Operas of the Soul: A Listener's Guide to the Sacred Cantatas*. The title aptly captures how Bach's cantatas, and all of the music on this concert programme, express the rich, tumultuous, beautiful stories of the human spirit. Tonight, you will experience the honing of creative work over the course of a lifetime in Bach's Triple Concerto; youthful curiosity, bright ideas, and integration of learning in his Cantata 150; the struggle to be heard and included in Christiane Mariane von Ziegler's poetic collaboration with Bach on Cantata 128; and the significance of roots and folklore in Grégoire Jaey's Aïga-Faros. Linking all these pieces is the thread of awe – human experience contextualized by powerful natural and spiritual forces and the longing for something beyond ourselves.

Bach's Triple Concerto for Flute, Violin, Harpsichord and Strings, BWV 1044 reached its final form late in his life. Perhaps he crafted it for his visit to Frederick the Great's court in Berlin and Potsdam in 1747, where his son Carl Philip Emmanuel was employed as chamber musician. The musical material, however, originated decades earlier. The concerto's outer movements are adaptations of the Prelude and Fugue, BWV 894, a virtuosic piece of courtly entertainment from Bach's time in Weimar. Then, he was barely thirty years old and just encountering the instrumental concertos of Vivaldi for the first time. Bach was fascinated with Vivaldi's writing, transcribed some of his concertos for solo keyboard, and, as evidenced by BWV 894, quickly began improvising in a similar style at the keyboard. The middle movement of BWV 1044 is borrowed from his Organ Trio Sonata No. 3, another example of Bach digesting instrumental ensemble music at the keyboard. The Organ Sonatas served as a significant technical challenge for his teenaged son Wilhelm Friedmann, who was becoming a keyboard virtuoso in his own right. The possibility of turning these pieces of keyboard music back into the instrumental ensemble music on which they were modeled must have been obvious to Bach. In the process, though, he polished his musical ideas, making them longer and more carefully structured.

Bach's Cantata 150 "Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich" is likely his earliest surviving piece for voices and instruments. It probably dates from 1706, when he was a twenty-one-year-old organist in his family's town of Arnstadt, struggling to match his artistic vision to the demands of the local consistory. Around this time, Bach received a reprimand for his unwillingness to work with the local student choir, which he complained was too unruly, and for bringing in a young woman to sing from the organ loft during the Sunday service. Cantata 150 is based on Psalm 25, a text expressing longing for God and the struggle to find contentment amid the turmoil of life. Painting that turmoil, the text weaves in a reference to Psalm 29, an evocative description of a thunderstorm shaking and breaking cedar trees. It shows his remarkable mastery of the choral motet form in its choruses. The opening chorus is complex and chromatic, expressing the ardent longing in the text. The middle chorus highlights the words "lead" and "truth" in constantly ascending scales. The final chorus borrows one of Buxtehude's favourite techniques (unsurprising, since

Bach had made a long pilgrimage to hear Buxtehude in the previous year), a passacaglia for chorus and instruments. The repeating bass pattern that undergirds the music conveys the sense of steadiness and predictability of God's protection, whatever might arise. The cantata's arias, though, betray Bach's youthful inexperience in their brevity and simplicity. They may be his first attempts at writing for solo voice.

The second "triple concerto" on the program is Aïga-Faros by Canadian flautist and composer Grégoire Jaey. The following are his own comments about his work.

"Water and fire" in Occitan, the language of my roots. The internal mood, the succession of life events, nature submitting to changes that are sometimes abrupt, sometimes gradual, according to the strength of the force applied. The two extremes coexist within the core of a person or of a society, or even in the diverse cosmologies that explain the world — and are reflected in the artistic gesture of many works. Rather than opposing them, this one-movement piece is a journey through several states that are contrasting in their essence but are inherently interdependent in order to achieve equilibrium. The violin is often associated with fire, and the flute is used by Bach in flowing patterns evoking water. Here the violin, flute, and harpsichord are alternately water or fire... We can observe when comparing baroque, Arabic, and Slavic music, that certain intervals and certain significant notes, as situated in the harmony, have a particular effect when heard, and as such are, in a sense, universal. The theme, imbued with the colours of traditional Eastern music, reminds us that at the root of the works of many composers is their folklore.

The final piece on the program is Bach's Ascension Day Cantata 128 "Auf Christi Himmelfahrt allein". Its text shares the theme of longing with Cantata 150 and presents Christ's Ascension as opening a path to satisfaction. This piece is a relatively late cantata of Bach's, composed in 1725 near the end of the flurry of cantata writing with which he began his tenure as Cantor in Leipzig. It is one of nine that Bach created with the poet Christiane Mariane von Ziegler. Daughter of a wealthy, influential Leipzig family, Mariane von Ziegler was just thirty years old and not yet a published poet, when the cantata librettist with whom Bach had been working suddenly died, and he turned to her for help. Later, she went on to publish a cycle of cantata texts in 1729 and become an advocate for the inclusion of women's voices in public discourse. Von Ziegler's texts seem to have inspired Bach to create innovative and surprising musical forms, and this cantata is no exception. The most striking movement is the aria and recitative for bass that is the musical center and focal point of the cantata's message. Having come a very long way from his slightly awkward youthful arias of Cantata 150, achieving expert mastery of the operatic da capo aria form that was in vogue, here Bach chooses to make a shocking change to the da capo form. A da capo aria has two verses of text, which are set to two distinct musical sections – an A section and a B section. After the B section, the aria returns to the text and music of the A section, giving the form its name "da capo" or "from the beginning". Almost every aria of the early eighteenth century followed this form.

In the bass aria of Cantata 128, however, Bach interrupts the aria just when the listeners would have expected the return of the A section, creating a “what is happening now?!” moment. As they listen with extra attention, Bach delivers to the audience the meaning of Christ’s ascension in an accompanied recitative: it opens a gateway to encounter the Divine, and, astonishingly, that encounter is not to be awaited in some distant realm, but present all around us.

Grégoire Jaey eloquently articulates the significance of cultural heritage in the notes for his piece. Bach’s music, his dramas of the soul, are part of our world’s shared heritage. Johannes Brahms and Max Reger both found themes for new compositions in Cantatas 150 and 128, and they continue to meaningfully communicate the longing of spirit for healing, unity, and transcendence.