

Christmas Day

St Bartholomew's, New York

December 23: it is exactly a year since we gave the first of our three concerts in Weimar – Parts I to III of the *Christmas Oratorio*. What a strange feeling to be back at the mid-winter solstice and to have come full circle after a year of nothing but Bach! We have come to Manhattan, to Leopold Stokowski's old church, St Bartholomew's on Park Avenue. It is not just a lot colder here in New York (minus 10 degrees), the terms of reference, too, are so different, the celebrations and all the trappings making scarcely any discernible concession to their historical or spiritual origins. Mammon reigns supreme. Where in Weimar a year ago the *Weihnachtsmarkt* and the huge Norway spruce Christmas tree dominated the town square as living symbols, here in the lobbies of the grandiose hotels the carols are canned and the fake Christmas trees are encrusted with baubles and shiny parcels like gorgeous exotic fruit.

Christmas Eve/Christmas Day: The penny is only just beginning to drop – we are almost at the end of the pilgrimage. I find myself torn between feelings of relief that the finishing post is a mere seven days away and an overwhelming sadness that it is all about to come to an end. The fact is that by and large we have achieved what we set out to do in the face of colossal odds – all manner of obstacles, gremlins, disappointments and frustrations of one sort or another and, most crippling of all, lack of financial security. Yet we have been kept afloat by the amazing generosity of a handful of individual benefactors and on course thanks to the heroic efforts (and good nature) of key members of staff and wave after wave of amazing musicians and their long-suffering families. Fortunately many of them have come along for this closing lap and so were able to attend our Christmas Eve party: with its 'Secret Santa' raffle, a much more convivial affair than last year's in Weimar, which began too early and ran out of steam by 8pm.

Everyone seems aware that it is going to take a huge effort to make this music work here. It is certainly a tough call: twelve new cantatas spread over three concerts in seven days (well in excess of Bach's performance schedule!) and very little time to rehearse in the church itself. On the plus side, Bach is on irresistible form at Christmas time – and I don't mean just the *Christmas Oratorio*, but these fabulous cantatas – grandly festive and touching by turns. In fact it's a travesty that the oratorio eclipses them in popular esteem.

Boxing Day, and last night's Christmas Day concert turned out to be blessed. It felt like a true celebration with everyone in the group fully alive and committed, exchanging happy glances and smiles and enjoying the bits they had not fully registered till the moment of performance. It began with BWV 91 **Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ**, which sets Luther's hymn as a majestic chorale cantata. The opening fantasia has a buoyancy, swagger and – through the build-up of its running G major scales over or under sustained thirds in the horns – that special sense of expectation that is the hallmark of Bach in Christmas mode. It is one of those movements which expose his seventeenth-century roots – say, in the *Zwiegesänge* of Praetorius in the way he sets 'das ist wahr' and the syncopated 'Kyrie eleis' with such

unselfconscious abandon. The mood persists in the soprano recitative interwoven with the second verse of the hymn, and in the festive tenor aria set for three oboes swinging along like prototype saxophones: baroque big band music in the city of the Village Vanguard! Even at Christmas time Bach wouldn't be Bach without a reference to the 'vale of tears' from which the newly incarnate Christ will lead us. He duly obliges with a slow, chromatic *accompagnato* (No.4) for bass and strings moving in contrary motion, which brings one up short. An extended duet for soprano and alto, with a dotted motif for the unison violins, postulates the poverty that God assumed by coming into the world and the 'brimming store of heaven's treasures' bestowed on the believer. When he came to rework this cantata during the 1730s Bach added lilting syncopations to the vocal lines to illustrate the human aspiration to sing (and, by implication, dance) like the angels. These clash with the violins' dotted figure and the polarity between them is reinforced by means of upward modulations, once in sharps (to symbolise man's angel-directed aspirations), once in flats (to represent Jesus' 'human nature'). The final chorale is richly harmonised with the two horns and timpani working up to a rousing two-bar cadence.

Next came BWV 121 **Christum wir sollen loben schon**, one of the oldest-feeling of all Bach's cantatas. Luther himself appropriated and translated this fifth-century Latin hymn, 'A solis ortu cardine'. Bach sets its opening verse in motet style, the voices doubled by old-fashioned cornetto and three trombones, as well as the usual oboes and strings. There is something mystical about this modal tune, not least in the way it seems to start in the Dorian and end in the Phrygian (or, in the language of diatonic harmony, on the dominant of the dominant). To me it calls to mind images of those angular, earnest faces one so often finds in fifteenth-century Flemish paintings depicting shepherds at the manger-stall. Perhaps more than in any other cantata you sense a primitive root, an early Christian origin for this Marian text (Mary the 'spotless maid' with 'pure body as temple of His honour'). The archaic feel of the opening chorus seems perfectly attuned to the incomprehensible mystery of the Incarnation. Unequivocally modern, however, is the startling enharmonic progression – a symbolic 'transformation' in fact – at the end of the alto recitative (No.3) describing the miracle of the virgin birth. This is the tonal pivot of the entire cantata and, appropriately, it occurs on the word 'kehren' (to turn or reverse direction): with 'wundervoller Art' (Bach's play on words is his cue for a 'wondrous' tritonal shift) God 'descends' and takes on human form, symbolically represented by the last-minute swerve to C major. It is the perfect preparation for the bass aria (No.4), with its bold Italianate string writing and diatonic solidity, describing how John the Baptist 'leapt for joy in the womb when he recognised Jesus'. Bach's overall design for his cantata is to mirror the change from darkness to light and to show how the moment when Christians celebrate the coming of God's light into the world coincides with the turning of the sun at the winter solstice. Beyond that his purpose is to emphasise the benefit of the Incarnation for mankind – again, the supreme goal is to join the angelic choir (cue for a brilliant audition which hoists the soprano up to a top B in the penultimate recitative). Any composer other than Bach would have been tempted to set the final chorale in some glittering

stratospheric tessitura, but by returning to the cantata's opening tonality (E major with its ambiguous and inconclusive modal twist to F sharp) and by retaining the burnished timbre of the cornetto and trombones to intensify the choral sound, Bach finds other, subtler ways of achieving a luminous conclusion. After all, it is the believer's hopes – not the certainty – of eternity that are being evoked here.

We followed this with BWV 40 **Darzu ist erschienen der Sohn Gottes**, composed a year earlier and, like BWV 121, for the second day of Christmas. The first thing that strikes one is that Bach seems to have got his days wrong. Instead of using St Matthew's Gospel for this day as his starting point, he turns to the epistle for the *third* day of Christmas as the basis of his cantata: 'For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil' (1 John 3:8). Incorporating these defiant words into his opening chorus (scored for pairs of oboes, horns and the string band) Bach adopts the *stilo concitato* (literally the 'excited' style) invented by Monteverdi over a hundred years before. Did Bach first encounter this colourful idiom as a boy in Lüneburg? One stands back and admires the accomplished way he interpolates it in mid-fantasia, as it were, so that every voice or instrument to which he ascribes the martial rhythms in turn stands out from the overall texture, giving vigorous endorsement to the military campaign against sin and the devil instituted with Jesus' birth. Despite the positive, upbeat feel to this chorus and its final *tierce de Picardie*, Bach sets it in F *minor* – a reminder that Jesus' victory through his passion is still a few months off.

Bach responds alertly to this dramatic imagery both here and in the ensuing recitative, which reflects the antitheses so loved by the John of the gospel: darkness and light, Word and flesh. Here it takes the form of Jesus' descent as 'the mighty Son of God... to become a little creature'. Bach structures his cantata with no less than three chorales, all in minor keys, inserted at strategic points. The first, 'Die Sünd macht Leid,' refers to Jesus' gift of comfort to the believer – 'Sin brings sorrow, Christ brings joy' (the underlying theme of the *St John Passion*); the second, 'Schüttle deinen Kopf', confirms how the believer has learnt from Jesus to deride the fangless serpent now that its head has been 'dashed'; and the last, 'Jesu, nimm dich deiner Glieder', sums up John's vision of the glorified Christ bringing unending 'joy' and 'bliss' to the world.

The central group of movements focus on Jesus' struggle with the devil on our behalf and his defeat of the 'hellish serpent'. In his feisty, rumbustious D minor aria (No.4) the bass soloist seems to be jeering at the slippery monster from the safety of the touch-line. In the ensuing *accompagnato*, a gentle *barcarola*, the alto explains that though Adam's children (in other words, all mankind) had been poisoned with the 'venom of souls' by the snake in Eden, Jesus' appearance in the flesh has drawn the poison in fulfilment of God's design. That there is still a bit of devilry around is clear from the tenor aria (No.7) scored for two oboes, two horns and continuo. It starts out genially enough, a little reminiscent of the third movement of Brandenburg No.1, but the voice line is soon stretched to the limit, ironically by melismas encouraging Christians to 'rejoice'. But the autograph score suggests that it was the wind

players, and not the long-suffering tenor, who were the first to complain, forcing Bach to extend his 'B' section by six bars (these are squashed in at the foot of the page) to give *them*, rather than the tenor, time to catch their breath before the *da capo*. Since the underlying comparison here is between Jesus and a hen protecting her chicks, we could be looking at a particular brand of less-than-subtle humour.

We had saved the most festive and brilliant of these four cantatas, BWV 120 **Unser Mund sei voll Lachens**, till last. Its opening movement is identical to that of the overture to the fourth Suite, BWV 1069, with the addition of a pair of flutes to the first oboe line and a chorus joining in the 12/8 allegro section. Instrumentalists need to rethink familiar lines and phrasing now that they are suddenly doubled by voices singing of laughter; singers need to adjust to well-established instrumental conventions. The piece sounds new-minted, alive with unexpected sonorities and a marvellous rendition of laughter-in-music – so different from the stiff, earnest way it is sometimes played as orchestral music. Bach's specifications for *senza ripieni* and *con ripieni* may well originate with one of the cantata's revivals between 1728 and 1731, and are relevant testimony in countering the noisy claims for *de rigueur* one-to-a-part performance of his sacred vocal music. The whole piece has irresistible swagger, but is saved from degenerating into a Breughel-like peasant stomp by its innate elegance and lightness of touch – more Kentucky Running Set than Morpeth Rant.

The arias are good, too: one for tenor with two flutes (No.2), which describes the believers' thanks and meditation soaring heavenwards, and a brainteaser of an alto aria (No.4), with 9/8 and 3/4 dotted rhythms embedded in a text that could have sprung from one of the English seventeenth-century metaphysical poets: 'Lord, what is man, that Thou, through such pain, would redeem him?' – but a long way in musical style from Pelham Humfrey or Henry Purcell. There is an exquisite duet for soprano and tenor (No.5) singing the angels' words to the shepherds from St Luke – 'Glory to God in the highest' – and based on the *Virga Jesse floruit* antiphon Bach inserted into the *Magnificat* BWV 243a. It ends with an almost frivolous pastoral-style setting of the words 'goodwill towards men' with the voices chirruping in tenths. The final aria for bass with trumpets, strings and oboes is in heroic style, almost a prototype of 'Großer Herr' from the *Christmas Oratorio*. It is assertive, festive and brilliant, the oboes tactfully dropping out in the 'B' section where the singer addresses 'you strings of deep devotion'. A pithy chorale – the fifth verse of Kaspar Fügen's 'Wir Christenleut' (1592) – concludes this stirring work.

St Bart's was full to bursting, the audience including the mayor of New York City, Rudy Giuliani, who confounded his bodyguards by making his way backstage at the end to express his appreciation. Afterwards he went on air in his radio programme to enthuse about the pilgrimage and promised to return to the second and third of our concerts.