

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 7 December 2023
7.30pm

Bach 300

Solomon's Knot

Zoë Brookshaw soprano I
Clare Lloyd-Griffiths soprano I
Ciara Hendrick soprano II
Lucy Page soprano II
Kate Symonds-Joy alto
Michał Czerniawski alto
Thomas Herford tenor
Andrew Tortise tenor
Jonathan Sells artistic director,
bass
Alex Ashworth bass

George Clifford violin I, leader
Guy Button violin I
Gabriella Jones violin II
Rebecca Harris violin II
Joanne Miller viola
Sarah McMahon cello
Jan Zahourek double bass
Daniel Lanthier oboe, oboe
d'amore, recorder I
Robert de Bree oboe, oboe
d'amore, recorder II

Inga Maria Klaucke bassoon
Russell Gilmour trumpet I
William Russell trumpet II
Katie Hodges trumpet III
Anna Drysdale horn
Sarah Hatch timpani
James Johnstone organ,
harpsichord

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort BWV60 (1723)

Wachet! betet! betet! wachet! BWV70 (1723)

Interval

Magnificat in E flat BWV243a with Christmas
interpolations (1723)



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O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort BWV60 was first performed in Leipzig on 7 November 1723. On the folder containing the original performing parts, Bach described the work as a 'Dialogus'. This dialogue cantata contains two allegorical figures, Fear (*Furcht*) and Hope (*Hoffnung*) – they discuss the route to salvation. The shaping of a cantata around two voices is unusual – indeed, none of the movements employ a single vocal soloist.

We're plunged into a soundworld of anticipation. Even before the alto soloist has joined in, we might be able to predict the libretto: Fear's trembling of the heart is depicted by the repeated-note palpitations in the strings. The movement teems with illustrative details: a sustained pedal-note in the continuo represents 'Ewigkeit', and the tenor also has to contend with controlling his melismatic breath during what must feel like a small eternity on 'warte'.

Bach's characterisation of Fear and Hope is most clear in the first recitative. Hope's melodic writing is simple, and his large intervals seem to convey something of his positive stance. In contrast, Fear's melodies are angular with dissonance: turning to *arioso* for 'martert' ('tortures'), they slither in syncopation. Hope describes how God provides a way from the torments of temptation, carrying us on a melisma intertwined with the basso continuo.

Wachet! betet! betet! wachet! BWV70 was first performed two weeks later, on 21 November 1723. It is an adaptation of the Weimar cantata for the second Sunday of Advent of 1716 (BWV70a). Leipzig, however, observed *tempus clausum* during Advent. Bach's repurposing of the Weimar cantata for the 26th Sunday after Trinity – whose readings shared liturgical themes – is grounded in this set of circumstances. Bach expanded the cantata to include recitatives, as well as an additional chorale; he also added trumpet and oboe.

The opening movement sets the stakes for this impressive two-part cantata. It was seemingly the first time Bach had tried out the compositional technique of choral insertion in large scale. As Alfred Dürr remarked, the chorale insertion within the reprise of expanded sections of the orchestral *ritornello* gives rise to a 'form of alternation, rich in tension'. There's a thrilling immediacy to the colour of the ensemble, too: the trumpet conjures a sense of warning, and its fanfares and trilling sirens rouse an alertness among the other musicians. Of course, the timbre alludes to the end times – what will happen when the 'trumpet shall sound' for real?

Terror, simply put. The second movement is more an earthquake than an accompanied recitative. More earthly snares are brought to bear in the aria for soprano and strings: the violins scorn the soloist in rattling motives – representations of the 'tongues of mockers' – and the sudden entries and scalic disappearances of the unison obbligato create an unpredictability to the exchange. Part I closes with the last verse of the hymn *Freu dich sehr, o meine Seele* (Freiburg, 1620).

Part II brings more melodic and dance-like music. But the final recitative and aria bring the two affective

aspects of Judgement – terror and joy – into close contact. The trumpet intones the chorale 'Es ist gewisslich an der Zeit' in extraordinary temporal superimposition. The *arioso* conclusion then brings the bliss we've been promised: an extensive melisma on 'joy' (*Freuden*) unravels into the following aria, an exploration of tranquil refreshment. Through this slow-moving, open expanse created by the solo bass and continuo, we move towards a place with no more earthly pain; but first, the 'sound and crack' of the last stroke (*Schalle, knalle, letzter Schlag*). A seven-part chorale closes the cantata in appropriate grandeur.

James Halliday writes that given the extraordinary choral and instrumental writing in Bach's *Magnificat in E flat* BWV243a, the Kantor must have worked hard to gather such a virtuosic group of singers and players. He also notes Bach's unimaginably heavy workload at this time of year. The *Magnificat* reflects how Bach composed incredible music in spite of – perhaps even as a result of – these pressures. It was composed for Bach's first Christmas Day in Leipzig, and so predates the more familiar D major, revised version BWV243. The setting of the Virgin Mary's song is interspersed with texts by Martin Luther and from Luke's Gospel. Additional Christmas texts, including three carols and a *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, were interpolated between the verses of this work.

Most obvious is Bach's playing with different colours and musical imagery. The choir enters with musical laughter – rhetoric which is later drawn upon by the trilling trumpets. Even within the enveloping polyphony, there are moments of intricate detail: a pair of flutes momentarily emerge, as if to grab air. It's a celebration of all human life – grand and small.

Reflective verses of the *Vespers* are assigned to the soloists. In the 'Et misericordia', a duet for alto and tenor – the opening of the *St Matthew Passion* distilled into domestic drama, perhaps – the flutes shadow the violins with the fragility of pious fear. In 'Suscepit Israel', Bach gives the oboes a plainsong melody – the melody Mozart would go on to use in the 'Lux Aeterna' of his *Requiem* – against which the alto and soprano soloists weave mournful lines.

But there are aspects of boyish transgression, too. Bach's interest in genealogy is all too apparent in 'Omnes generationes', a vigorous fugal chorus. In two separate sections, Bach arranges the fugal entries in a stepwise ascending pattern. Each vocal part imitates the last, at a regular distance of two beats, and one degree of the scale higher. These fugal entries, each superseding the last, cover the range of an entire octave – twice; it's like a huge family tree painted in sound. But my favourite musical pun is Bach's final trick. As the doxology closes 'as it was in the beginning', Bach treats us to a condensed recapitulation of the opening movement. A move that's as fresh and brilliant as it was 300 years ago.

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