

Program Notes

From Christmas Day to Epiphany, the holiday season in eighteenth-century Leipzig was filled with music—and as town cantor, Johann Sebastian Bach was responsible for every piece that was performed. Were Leipzig listeners aware of Bach's importance? Probably not, but the quality and variety of what they heard must have made an impression. Between December 25 and January 6, 1724—Bach's first year in Leipzig—he composed (or revised) the first version of the Magnificat, a Sanctus, and six cantatas. And it was for this very same set of feast days in 1734, eleven years later, that he produced the *Christmas Oratorio*. Based on religious themes, oratorios rely on arias, recitatives, and choruses to dramatize their subject matter—costumes, scenery, and staging were forbidden. Unlike Handel's *Messiah*, a large-scale, unified work actually intended for performance in the theater, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* consists of six separate cantatas, each intended for a different feast day of the Christmas celebration, when it would have been performed between the Gospel and the sermon. Not only were the cantatas performed on different days, but the work was actually performed in different locations as well. The booklet printed for use by the Leipzig congregation in 1734 indicates that Parts I, II, IV, and VI of the *Christmas Oratorio* were performed twice, at both the Thomaskirche and the Nikolaikirche, while Parts III and V were heard only at the Nikolaikirche. Structurally, each part of the *Christmas Oratorio* stays close to the form of the cantatas Bach provided for every Sunday service, opening with a choral movement (with the exception of Part II, which begins with the *Sinfonia pastorale*), continuing with an alternation of recitatives and arias (solos, duos, or trios), and ending with a traditional Lutheran chorale.

If the *Christmas Oratorio* was written for six separate services, is it anachronistic to perform the work as a unified piece? Although it was never performed this way in Bach's time, there are several indications that Bach may have conceived the piece as a single entity. The Evangelist's narration—taken from Luke 2:1–21 and Matthew 2:1–12—weaves together all six cantatas, from the ordering of the census in the first cantata to the visit of the Wise Men in the sixth. Bach begins and ends the work in D Major (returning to the key in Part III as well), implying large-scale form with the use of recurring tonality. Bach also uses instrumentation to create dramatic contrast throughout all six cantatas. Parts I, III, and VI use festive trumpets, flutes, and oboes, while the other cantatas display more subdued instrumental color. Finally, as Bach's nineteenth-century biographer Philipp Spitta asserts, to think of the *Christmas Oratorio* as six independent cantatas conflicts with the way the church thought of the Christmas season. As Spitta writes, "...The church itself regarded the whole period till Twelfth Night—from Christmas Day, that is, till the Epiphany—which had been held as a feast even in heathen Germany—as one festival season of which the Birth of Christ was the central idea.... Thus, irrespective of the fact that the six portions of the *Christmas Oratorio* deal with a progressive series of events, they must be held, according to church views, to constitute a whole."

Throughout the *Christmas Oratorio*, the Evangelist's Gospel narrative grounds the libretto, while the arias and choral movements reflect on the events with newly written text provided by Christian Friederich Henrici, who, under the *nom de plume* Picander, wrote the libretto for the St. Matthew Passion. Interestingly, Bach used extant music—primarily from three secular cantatas he had composed in preceding months for royal occasions—for least a third of this newly composed devotional poetry. The jubilant choral movement with which the oratorio begins, “Jauchzet, frohlocket,” for example, was adapted from a cantata for the birthday of the Princess Electress of Saxony and Queen of Poland, Maria Josepha, first performed on December 8, 1733, “Tönet, ihr Pauken!” (Sound, ye drums!). Some have found this reuse of music troubling, especially given its secular origins, and have suggested that perhaps the *Christmas Oratorio* was written first, but had not yet been performed. But Spitta suggests (albeit with a dash of hyperbole) that perhaps this musical recycling actually speaks volumes about Bach's musical sensibilities:

...Bach's whole mode of expression was built on true church feeling; whether he wrote sacred or secular music, whether he composed organ fugues or chamber sonatas, the fundamental church sentiment developed directly from the nature of the organ pervades all his works, and he consequently could write nothing that jarred with it. On the other hand, his secular occasional pieces were not genuinely secular; as such they scarcely fulfilled their aim, and the composer only restored them to their native home when he applied them to church uses.

As a church composer first and foremost, Bach approached music with faith in its ability to communicate the most profound human sentiments—while at the same time, the works he wrote were intended for practical use. With its deeply felt, personal texts and powerful music—regardless of its origins—the *Christmas Oratorio* illustrates the effortless way in which Bach merged the realities of his job with his unwavering belief in music's power.