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**Keep It Short**

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This year’s series of lectures is simply concerned with the sounds of music - that is, the results of the composer, but also the efforts of the performer in delivering the music to the audience. There are really two ways of looking at musical analysis. The first is visual, which involves a grasp of musical notation, an analysis of what is on the page and an awareness of biographical and archival material. I covered these aspects in detail in last year’s lectures. This year, to balance things out, I shall opt for the other side, which is simply a matter of asking what you can get, in the most informed way, from simply *listening* to the music. This means, of course, that you are listening to a single performance and, in the process of performing, the performer may emphasise one aspect or perhaps conceal another. It is a great necessity, therefore, to indulge in hearing multiple performances before you can claim that you have a rounded appreciation of the work.

We begin the year with Bach; we shall end the year with Beethoven. In between, you have many famous names. In the case of Bach and Beethoven, I thought it would be appropriate to choose an example of the way they felt it most effective to introduce themselves to a new public. In the case of Beethoven, this is his first published string quartet, with which he wanted to make absolutely clear, in minimum time and with maximum impact to his public, what kind of a composer he was and what he could deliver to his audience.

The Bach we shall hear today was the first piece that he delivered to the public when he was appointed the Director of Music and Organist of St Thomas’s Church in Leipzig. This was 1723, and he stayed there for the rest of his life. It was his composing centre. It was there that audiences heard the first performances of essentially all the cantatas he wrote, all the organ music that he wrote, the St Matthew Passion, the St John Passion, the B Minor Mass (although he never heard the latter as a single piece).

It is important to realise the situation Bach was in. He was quite a young composer, with a family to support and with duties as a schoolmaster. Not only did he teach music, train the choir, create his own compositions and direct the orchestra, he was also obliged to teach the kids Latin. You might therefore sympathise with his task in hand.

He wanted to introduce himself, on a Sunday shortly before Christmas in 1723, with a work that encapsulated what he could deliver. He well knew the things that were liable to put people off church music. It could be too long; it could be too dreary and melancholy and too full of guilt; it could drag on for hours, prompting an audience to look for the hourglass. He had to grab their attention, and keep their attention, throughout a cheerful text. I think this was one reason why he chose, for the upcoming feast of Christmas, the story of the Virgin Mary discovering she was pregnant by unknown means, cheerily saying to her sister, “Well, I don’t blame anybody – praise to God!” The *Magnificat* was a text born from that sort of exuberance.

It is a text that can be divided into twelve short segments, each of which Bach treated like a complete picture in a gallery. Accordingly, this entitles us to proceed through Bach’s gallery, looking at each picture, not referring to reference books or archival material, but merely noting what is in the picture – what the eye can see, what the ear can hear, our instinctive impressions. Of course, you have to allow for the fact that the 18th Century listener was already well-grounded, not only in the Latin text, but also in some of the assumptions that lay behind it; an audience of regular churchgoers like those at Leipzig would have been acclimatised to a language of music that was used to implement and illustrate what the text said.

The average listener at that fairly chilly church in Leipzig, November 1723, would have initially heard the beginning of the *Magnificat* as a very cheerful and extravagant sound. They would have known that their church had resources of orchestra and choir, but would not necessarily have heard them together. The beginning of *Magnificat* is a declaration that it is cheerful and flamboyant: three trumpets, timpani, oboes and flutes (quite a luxury!), bassoons, full string orchestra, organ continuo, and a chorus, not in four parts, but in five. This was the most elaborate and flamboyant sound that Bach could accommodate in his church; he essentially takes the text and waves it at you. There are two things you can do with dramatic words: one is to emphasise their rhythm; the other, as Bach well knew, is to emphasise their flamboyance, and this is exactly what you get with the *Magnificat*. He chooses, first of all, to emphasise the way everybody says ‘Magnificat’ – mag-nif-icat, tum-pum-pa-pum! There is a military tone to it, like an uplifting fanfare. From here, he proceeds to great melismas - the waving of banners – with ‘Magnificat’ moving through lots of notes, wandering amongst all the voices and instruments, even the top trumpet, where it can move between semi-quavers. It is a very, very flamboyant show.

[Music plays]

That is the big scene, the biggest he could manage with his resources, and everybody must have been fairly impressed. It would have been a lot of sound, a lot of people, a lot of virtuosity, a small, happy and innocent text, all packed into two minutes of performance. The whole work of twelve segments lasts slightly under 25 minutes, which gives between one and a half and two minutes for each part.

Having presented the grand picture, you are now faced with the fact that it is not a national celebration! It is a personal celebration, Mary speaking to her sister, Elizabeth, alone – it is a one woman show. From the exuberance that sets the title of the piece, Bach moves straight into another cheerful number that presents one person: “*Et exsultavit* / My spirit has rejoiced”. The Latin also accommodates the idea of jumping and dancing, which conjures an image of Mary’s spirit, if not her body, jumping around in enthusiasm. He lifts the fanfare figure from the previous piece, all those trumpets playing up and down the D Major arpeggio. He starts Mary’s dance with a little triad, the same little figure.

Bach wants to persuade you that she is dancing and exuberant, but with no interest in prevailing fashion. The difficulty with starting a dance movement in triple time is that everybody immediately thinks of a minuet – terribly fashionable, but also rather secular. Does God like minuets? We do not know. We know that the court dances minuets, but that might not be the best reference point. So he very quickly disrupts it with a little figure that you will know cannot be from a minuet. It is not graceful, it is not danceable. It is very energetic, with a little jump on each note - “and my spirit thus rejoiced in God my saviour.” Immediately, you are now down to a single speaker in this drama, rather than the full works.

[Music plays]

Incidental to his composition, Bach is also in the process of showing off some wonderful, available singers to his employers. These are singers who can hold long breaths, creating a long trail of coloratura, with no space for any breath in it. By the end of the piece, Bach really is testing his singers and showing off their technical skill.

Transported from the big to the small, it is inevitable that things cannot remain cheerful forever; the Latin text realises this and takes a turn towards the minor, which Bach respects. He has regarded the humility and the humbleness of his “handmaiden”. Modern translations go for “slave girl”, which I do not think is quite accurate! Bach has presented two closed-ending movements so far. He now comes to an aria, which is predominantly a soliloquy: “For behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.” However, the word order of the Latin gives Bach the opportunity for a total surprise. The original culminates in “*omnes generations* / all generations.” At this moment, the aria erupts into a chorus of singing, involving all the voices. We hear these crowd effects, of course, throughout the *Passion* settings. Bach was a great, almost cinematic orchestrator in terms of the way he used voice and the crowd, the effects of bringing voices in with the same text, piling up the entries, one on top of the other. When you think you have run the gamut, the voices start again, giving you this effect of endless generations, all making their claim. It is non-stop until, just before the end of that little chorus, the voices all come to a stop and you can hear them on a very triumphal, but unfinished, chord. They then proceed with “*omnes, omnes*!” to the end of the movement.

Before that, however, you have a much more sombre sound, and I think everybody in Bach’s audience would have picked up various things. It has a distinctively subservient feel to it. You are down to limited resources: one wind instrument, one soprano voice. However, the oboe sound is not that of the normal oboe; it is pitched lower. I am sure that Bach hoped some people in his audience would recognise it as the oboe d’amore, the oboe of love. He gives it a line that follows the gesture of the handmaiden bowing down. Humility is a downwards gesture, and so everything takes a long, s-shaped movement downwards, with a little rise at the end. Everybody will form their own image of the social status of this lady and the gesture she performs, until getting to the words “*ecce enim* / behold.” From this point, the music and the voice move upwards – “*ecce, ecce, ecce*...” All the phrases turn upwards and the melancholy oboe d’amore is forced to go along with them. But it is an internalised dialogue – a single voice and a faithfully imitating oboe part amounts to one musical thought spread between singer and instrument. Nobody in the church would have been expecting the sudden burst of “*omnes generations*” at the end, which is a wonderful shock.

[Music plays]

The hesitation before the very end is inspired, fooling an audience into thinking that the repeated “*omnes”* have exhausted themselves – only for them to then continue! I think there are quite a lot of smiles hidden behind this piece. It is not a po-faced setting at all, featuring many small nudges and comments and even jokes, for those who wish to hear and see them.

The next number is one such example, although I leave it to you to work it out. “*Quia fecit mihi magna* / He that is mighty has done great things with me, and holy is his name.” It is once again set for minimum forces – one singer (this time a bass, because it is referring to God) and one ostinato keyboard part, plodding along beneath it. The bass singer would have a composed part, but the person playing the organ or keyboard continuo would be reading from a bass part (and perhaps some figures, shorthand for the harmony), but would be improvising the continuo part – that is, whatever was played to elaborate, build up or magnify the bass part. “He that is mighty has done *great things with me*” – that is, made her bigger in many senses of the word. Most performances are not terribly elaborate at this point. They are quite decorous. The one you are about to hear is relatively decorous, but you can do all sorts of things with this bass line, running canons and parts in answer to it or in contrary motion. It is susceptible to a lot of showing off. I have a terrible feeling that Bach would have shown off just to highlight the pun in the verse, that here he was, making a great deal of something very little and elemental. Meanwhile, the bass (here, David Thomas) goes on singing, in his best sonorous style, of the mightiness of God and the holiness of his name.

[Music plays]

In contrast, now, Bach has to show something else: “His mercy is from generations unto generations.” We have experienced these “generations” already, and so Bach quite sensibly decides not to emphasise these again.

The section ends with the line, “to them that fear him.” So, as well as being soothing and pastoral, the piece also has to contain an element of potential fear. His is not just gratuitous kindliness – it has to be earned through doing the right thing.

This piece also provides the first opportunity for a duet. There are many things a duet can do. One is to suggest stability. A solo voice can go anywhere and is responsible to no one; two voices, particularly two that shadow each other, are a good symbol of stability and reassurance, of something having been organised in advance. Two singers cannot sing exactly in thirds and sixths by chance, so there can be nothing improvised about this. It is a built-in security blanket, surrounded by orchestration that reminds people of the traditional baroque music for comfort and security. This means shepherds, pastoral music, lilting rhythm, rather like the Pastoral Symphony from the *Christmas Oratorio* or the Pastoral Symphony from *Messiah*, played over a sustained, drone bass, like a shepherd’s bagpipe. Bach chooses to use strings, but with mutes and flutes, creating a romantic, soft-edged, almost comforting sound.

Only at the very end of all this comforting music do you suddenly have the voices trembling, which Bach achieves through repeated notes. Everything else runs up and down the scales, uneventfully, until, at the very end, the notes shiver on each syllable. As a singer, you have to decide what sort of effect you are going to add to the piece, carrying the music but still conveying a trembling fear.

[Music plays]

It is a wonderful idea to have the two singers hardly ever parting company from each other. They are obviously hand-in-hand, arm-in-arm, absolutely locked together through the whole piece. It is also a wonderful foil for the next, central chorus of Magnificat, which is “*Fecit potentiam*.” This is exactly the same setting as the initial “Mag-ni-fi-cat” – he takes both its rhythm and its flourishes. The dotted rhythm and long roulade show strength, until the horrible last moments of the piece. He scatters the word “*dispersit* / proud”, falling off downwards.

And then you come to this absolutely spine-tingling line, “in the imagination of their hearts”, which he repeats. It is a very short coda. First of all, you get very strange, incomplete yet wonderful harmonies, showing complete imagination – wild ideas of where it is all going to go. The chorus are followed by the full orchestra, who have not been heard in a while. The trumpeters are waiting to do their thing. It begins with a spine-shivering chord. Everybody plays, with an incomplete harmony, and with the trumpet playing the highest note that was available.

Trumpets were royal instruments. They were the purview of rich families, and so it is quite clear who Bach is pointing at with this scoring. He points at the imagination of rich people’s hearts, who have been misled by worldly promises. This is the perfect ten second epitome of the trumpet going to its top note and then falling off. Did they fall? Were they pushed? We shall learn later. But it is a spine-tingling moment, and Bach really underlines it because it is so different from the mood of ten minutes earlier.

[Music plays]

There has been a lot of controversy, in fact fisticuffs, at musicological conferences over the question of how many people sang Bach. We think of massed choruses when we think of his music, but we know for sure that he did not have a large chorus. Sometimes, he used a very small number of people. Over the last 20 or 30 years, theories have emerged suggesting that most Bach was sung, and possibly even played, by one performer per part – that is, not only did you have a single first violin, like you have a single first trumpet or a first oboe, but you had a single first soprano. As a result, all the choruses would be sung by the people who were singing the solos and you would only have to have five people around to do that. That is what you have just been listening to – there was no chorus involved in that section at all. It was only five soloists who were singing “the choral numbers”.

If you follow the other line of thinking, however, and use a lot of people, the effect is markedly different. Here is exactly the same chorus, but with many more people singing.

[Music plays]

I cannot take sides in this argument because I think both versions work. The only thing is that the soloists, who have to do everything in the first number, complain about the amount of money they are being paid for doing so many people’s work!

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats,” begins the next verse. As I said, you cannot help but wonder whether the trumpet jumped or was pushed. The text of this verse shows that he was pushed; God pushed him. Bach takes the scale the trumpet fell through as the beginning of his next aria, where the violins play down and down and down; he then “exalts the humble” and the violins all come up the other way, and the tenor with them.

[Music plays]

The descriptive powers of the next piece are a little more complicated, but it is obvious that the sweetest sounds available in Bach’s orchestra would come from the two flutes. They were always connected with sweetness and beauty. They both run around in thirds and sixths, creating a very sweet interval.

“The rich he hath sent empty away.” The bass line, instead of being sustained and played with the organ, is now plucked by the cello. This is pizzicato, the emptiest sound. When it comes to the end of the number, on the cadence, there is nothing except one pizzicato note. You could not be sent away more empty than that!

On the way to that cadence though, you will notice that he really stretches the singer, in terms of filling up with breath. I am sure he must have had the line, “he hath filled the hungry with good things”, in the back of his mind. A good thing for a singer faced with an endless run of semi-quavers is endless lung power, and you will hear the one longest melissma, quite frightening in its length, where the singer manages not to take a breath.

[Music plays]

I just hope a lot of people laughed in Leipzig at that point because it seems so beautifully set-up!  
  
“He hath received Israel his servant.” Bach uses a mellifluous trio of voices and a plain chant, the old Magnificat chant that was sung to the Tonus Peregrinus, the wandering tone. It was a plain chant that ended in the wrong key, hence “The Wanderer” – it wanders off. What more appropriate tag to add to the picture of the Israelites wandering in the desert than this? You had to recognise the Tonus Peregrinus when it struck up, but it was very familiar then, probably less so now.

We shall listen to this segment and to the segment that follows it.

[Music plays]

There is the oboe, playing that old-fashioned line, with the most beautiful part-writing going round it. This is a bit more beautiful than the scene perhaps deserves, but this is deliberate in order to set up the next number, which again is a slight nudge. “As he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed forever…” Bach equates “forefathers” with his predecessors, whom he obviously considered wrote slightly boring square music. He portrays, in a very square fugue, exactly how square he thought the forefathers of German music were. Four bars follows four bars, each voice coming in predictably and on time, all according to the rulebook, unimaginative and extremely dull!

[Music plays]

By the time he has introduced all four voices, he gives up on it being a fugue and takes the easy way out of writing chords; he reasons that the forefathers did not really struggle with fugal form, they just brought the voices in and let them wander a little, *ad libetum*.

That is the end of the *Magnificat* text. It has to have a “Gloria” at the end. “Gloria” has exactly what you would expect for a piece representing the Trinity, and that is triplets. You get three big cries of “Gloria” and, between them, more of this crowd music. For the first “Gloria”, to God the Father, the crowd begins at and rises from the bottom: the basses, then the tenors, then the altos, then the two sopranos. At the end, for the Holy Spirit, the reverse is true. In the middle, rather nicely, for God, the Son, they are all mingled together: a soprano, then a tenor, then a second soprano, then an alto. The whole thing represents the mix-up of humanity, very nicely portrayed in triplets; by the end of the final verse, everything is as it was in the beginning.

[Music plays]

You have exactly the music you heard and know very well from the opening “Magnificat.” Everything is rounded off. In musical playing terms, it lasts for about 25 minutes. I think it must have been the most wonderful introduction for the Leipzig audience to Bach’s potential. He delivered it every Sunday for the next umpteen years, with a new cantata, exemplifying a link between text, music and programmable message, which could reach the public without them having access to a score.

Thank you very much.

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