

Bach and Graupner: The Audition Cantatas

by John Curtis



Johann Kuhnau, Cantor of Thomasschule in Leipzig, died on June 5, 1722. The Leipzig Cantorate, one of the most prestigious and demanding positions in Germany, carried with it varied responsibilities: instruction of the Thomasschule students, musical direction of four major churches in Leipzig, training of the city's professional musicians, direction of the university music program, and maintenance of the organs at Thomaskirche and Nicolaikirche. Kuhnau was known not only as a fine musician but also as a successful lawyer proficient in Greek, Hebrew, and mathematics. He fulfilled the duties of the Cantorate admirably. Upon his death, the town council of Leipzig approached the greatest and most renowned musician in Germany to take his place, and Georg Philipp Telemann accepted the job.

Telemann in Leipzig

Telemann was no stranger to Leipzig and the council. From 1701 to 1705, while a law student at the University in Leipzig, he established himself as a musician in the city. In quick succession he founded a collegium musicum at the university, became music director of the city opera, and the mayor invited him to compose a cantata every other week for Thomaskirche, the city's biggest church. In 1704 he was appointed organist of the Neukirche, at that time the university church, and he volunteered to take on the duties of music director and have his collegium perform for services there at no extra salary or cost to the city. A year earlier while Kuhnau was ill the council had even approached Telemann about replacing Kuhnau as Cantor

in case of the older man's death. It was, therefore, no surprise that the council came back to Telemann nineteen years later, formally appointing him on August 13, 1722.¹

For Telemann, the offer came at an opportune time. He was in his second year as Cantor of the Johanneum in Hamburg when he began to have trouble with the Hamburg council. They considered outside activities, such as running the Hamburg collegium musicum and directing the opera company, unseemly for a proper Cantor. In July 1722 the town council drafted a resolution that forbade Telemann to take part in public performances. He responded by writing them a letter asking to be released from his position in Hamburg in order to accept the Leipzig offer. After lengthy deliberations, the Hamburg council decided he was too valuable to let go, refused to release him, and increased his salary. They evidently reconciled themselves to his penchant for secular, public performances. Later that year Telemann became music director of the Hamburg opera.

The Leipzig council knew by November 1722 that Telemann had turned down the position. Instead of offering the post to another composer based on reputation, they decided to solicit applications. By December 21 they were considering five candidates: Johann Sebastian Bach, Capellmeister in Cöthen; Christoph Graupner, Capellmeister in Darmstadt; Georg Friedrich Kaufmann, court organist and music director in Merseburg; Georg Balthasar Schott, organist at the Leipzig Neukirche and director of the collegium musicum; and Johann Heinrich Rolle, Cantor in Magdeburg. As part of the examination, each candidate was to compose a cantata and perform it in one of the Leipzig churches. Bach and Graupner were assigned two cantatas each to be presented in the Thomaskirche, apparently a sign that they were the favored candidates.² The

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libretti were presented to the candidates ahead of time. Although the librettist is unknown, the similarity of poetic styles between the audition cantatas of Bach and Graupner (and, indeed, of the first two cantatas Bach wrote after beginning his work in Leipzig, BWV 75 and 76) suggests the same poet wrote all four libretti.³ Graupner's audition was scheduled for January 17, 1723; Bach's was scheduled for three weeks later, on February 7.

Graupner's Audition

Christoph Graupner was not a stranger to the musical scene in Leipzig. He received much of his early musical training at the Leipzig Thomasschule, where Kuhnau was one of his teachers. His time there (1696–1704) overlaps the period of Telemann's residence in Leipzig. Graupner began his study of law at the university while Telemann was still a student. It is not surprising that Graupner was interested in the position; after all, the chance to succeed his old teacher would seem like a homecoming. While his Leipzig connections seemingly gave Graupner an advantage with the town council, he also built a reputation in Germany as an excellent composer. He was a successful opera composer first in Hamburg and then in the court of Ernst Ludwig, Landgrave of Hessen-Darmstadt, where he became

Capellmeister in 1712. He was a prolific composer whose lifetime output of 1,418 sacred cantatas and twenty-four secular cantatas dwarfs that of Bach.

Graupner's audition date, January 17, 1723, was the second Sunday of Epiphany. The Gospel text for that day was John 2: 1–11, the story of the wedding feast at Cana where Jesus performed his first miracle changing water into wine. The libretti for the two cantatas focus on different aspects of the story. *Aus der Tiefen rufen wir* (*Out of the depths we cry*) uses Jesus's response, "Meine Stund ist noch nicht kommen" ("My hour has not yet come"), to his mother's suggestion to perform the miracle. It expresses the uncertainty, anguish, and ultimately, hope with which his coming is awaited. The libretto of the second cantata, *Lobet den Herrn alle Heiden* (*Praise the Lord, all you nations*), deals with the allegorical marriage of the soul (the bride) to Christ (the bridegroom).⁴

Graupner responded to the different themes of the libretti by composing his cantatas in very different styles. Of the three movements of *Aus der Tiefen rufen wir*, the first and third are sung by the chorus. The choral writing is conservative and for the most part homophonic; the only exceptions are two brief fugato sections in the third movement. The

motet-style second movement includes brief accompanied recitatives for tenor and soprano and a bass arioso. There are no Italian-style, self-contained recitatives or arias. The orchestration calls for trumpet, three trombones, two oboes, strings, and continuo. The brass parts almost always double the voice parts—not a bad idea, considering the importance of the occasion and his unfamiliarity with the choir for which he was composing.

Lobet den Herrn alle Heiden, on the other hand, is composed in a contemporary, operatic style. Its seven movements include a large opening chorus and a closing chorale, with recitatives and *da capo* arias in between. The choral writing in the first movement is contrapuntal, including a fully developed "Allelujah" fugue that concludes the movement. The orchestration is the same as that of *Aus der Tiefen*, except for the addition of timpani and a second trumpet. Graupner uses the trumpets and timpani in the outer movements, expressing joy and excitement in the first movement, "Lobet den Herrn alle Heiden," and triumph in the chorale, "Sei seele still und diene" ("Be still, my soul, and serve").

The alto and tenor arias in *Lobet den Herrn* are virtuosic and expressive. The lengthy *da capo* aria for alto sets forth one of the main messages of the cantata: "Ein Christ der Christum liebet lebt stets von Sorgen" ("A Christian who loves Christ lives free from sorrow"). The *affekt* of the movement is confusing, however. While Graupner places great emphasis on the word "Sorgen" ("sorrow") with lengthy melismas and trills, the violins maintain a sprightly and cheerful dotted rhythm throughout (Figure 1). The tenor aria, "Gleich wie die Woge wanket, bald auf, bald nieder schwanket, so ist ein weltlich Herz" ("Just as waves toss, now swaying up, now down, so is a worldly heart") is more faithful to the meaning of its text, with wavelike motions written into the violin and oboe parts, as well as numerous swaying melismas on the word "schwanket" ("swaying") (Figure 2).

In the penultimate movement of *Lobet den Herrn* the bass soloist sums up the message of the cantata with the text "Wohl dem, der sich in allem an Jesum übergibt" ("Blessed are they who give themselves completely over to Jesus"). While it has

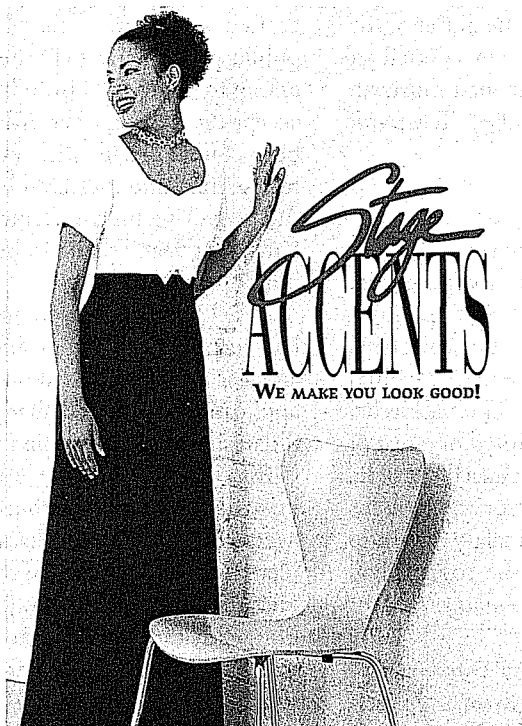
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long been speculated that eighteenth-century Lutheran congregations spontaneously joined in the singing of chorale movements, such participation must have occurred on this occasion, as the bass invites the people to stand and join in singing the final chorale as he sings "Auf, singet zu empfangen dies allerhöchsten Gut" ("Arise, sing to welcome this highest good"). The closing chorale is the ninth verse of the chorale "In allen meinen Taten" (also known as "O Welt, ich muss dich lassen").⁵ The simple homophonic chorale setting is accompanied by a freely-composed tune played in unison by oboes and violins. The trumpets and timpani, after playing *colla parte* chorus all the way through, play independently in the final four measures to end with a triumphant flourish.

The Leipzig town council reacted favorably to Graupner's audition. The cantatas are expressive and compelling, showing off choir, soloists, and instrumentalists to their best advantage, while at the same time not difficult to perform. However, it seems the council made up its mind before hearing Graupner's music. In the minutes to its meeting on January 15, 1723, two days before the audition, Councillors Lange, Born, Hölzel, and Wagner all indicated they were "inclined to favor Graupner."⁶ Lange, however, wisely cautioned they should make sure Graupner's current employer, Ernst Ludwig, would actually release him, though Graupner had already assured the council this would be no problem, as "he was under no hard and

Figure 1. *Lobet den Herrn*, movement 3, alto aria

Figure 2. *Lobet den Herrn*, movement 5, tenor aria

fast obligation” to the Landgrave.⁷ In fact it seems his obligation to Ludwig was more important than he thought. Ludwig did not want to lose the services of one of Germany’s most renowned musicians any more than the Hamburg town council wanted to lose Telemann, so he refused to grant Graupner permission to leave. On March 23 Graupner withdrew his application. He received a substantial raise as Capellmeister of Darmstadt and remained there until his death in 1760. The Leipzig council had now lost its two top prospects for the job and had to consider the other candidates who had completed their auditions, among them J. S. Bach.

Bach’s Audition

At the time of Kuhnau’s death in 1722, Bach was Capellmeister in Cöthen in the service of Prince Leopold. Bach got along well with the Prince and was satisfied with his position until Leopold married Friederica Henrietta (his own cousin) in December 1721. In a letter to his friend Georg Erdmann in 1730, Bach recalled

that the Prince’s dedication to the music of his court became “somewhat lukewarm, especially as the new Princess seemed to be unmusical.”⁸ The Leipzig opening was a timely opportunity for Bach to find more favorable surroundings, but he lacked the musical connections with the city enjoyed by Telemann and Graupner.

Bach’s audition date was February 7, 1723, the last Sunday after Epiphany, also known as Estomihi.⁹ In the eighteenth-century Lutheran calendar Estomihi, three days before Ash Wednesday, marked the beginning of the Lenten penitential season. The Gospel text for this Sunday, Luke 18: 31–43 is in two parts. In the first part of the text, Jesus tells his twelve disciples they are going to Jerusalem where he will be killed, but they do not understand what he is saying. In the second part a blind man named Bartimaeus senses Jesus’ presence and twice calls out “Son of David, have mercy on me,” whereupon his sight is restored.

The penitential nature of the liturgy left Bach at a disadvantage relative to

Graupner and the other candidates; he could not write glorious festival music with trumpets and timpani. His cantatas, while masterfully composed and perfectly expressive of their texts, are not as impressive at first hearing as were Graupner’s. *Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwölfe* (Jesus called the twelve to himself) BWV 22 is scored for oboe, strings, basso continuo, alto, tenor, bass, and chorus. *Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn* (You true God and Son of David) BWV 23 is scored for two oboes d’amore, cornett, three trombones, strings, basso continuo, four soloists, and chorus.¹⁰

Bach’s audition cantatas are more stylistically similar than Graupner’s cantatas. Each contains a combination of recitatives, arias, and choruses in self-contained movements. The differences in orchestration are not significant, as the change to oboes d’amore in Cantata 23 was likely made for practical reasons,¹¹ and the brass are used only to play *colla parte* choir in the final movement of Cantata 23.

The first movement of Cantata 22 is a



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densely composed aria for bass solo followed by a choral fugue. As the bass sings the words of Jesus, he is accompanied by oboe, strings, and continuo playing the same motivic material in intricate counterpoint. The fugue, marked *allegro*, passes subject and countersubject from part to part so quickly that the confusing sonority vividly illustrates the text “Sie aber vernahmen der Keines” (“They [the disciples] however understood nothing”); the effect is intensified by a *stretto* near the end.

The texts of the following three solo movements address the same theme: asking Christ to purify the listener’s heart sufficiently so that, unlike the hapless disciples, they may be able to understand Christ’s message. The two arias, for alto in the second movement and tenor in the fourth, are designed not to show the singers’ virtuosity but to illustrate the meaning of the text. In the alto aria the chromatic figuration of the oboe ritornello leads to more and more distant harmonies. The word “Leiden” (“suffering”) is set to an augmented sixth at the end of the first section (m. 31–32) and a Neapolitan sixth at the end of the final section (m. 68–71), dramatically illustrating Christ’s impending passion in Jerusalem. The tenor aria has equally compelling moments, especially as the jaunty $\frac{3}{4}$ dance rhythm comes to a gentle halt and fermata on the text “ziehe mich nach dir in Friede dahin” (“draw me to be with you in peace”) (m. 57–64) (Figure 3).

Linking the two arias is an accompanied recitative for bass. Unlike Graupner’s rather perfunctory recitative style, Bach illustrates every nuance of the text. He uses, for example, a thirty-second note run on the word “laufen” (“run”) and diminished chords on “Golgotha” and “Leiden.” At the end a sudden shift to major mode with a melisma on “Freuden” (“joy”) inspires a joyful flourish from the strings. Other examples of text-painting, such as the cross-shaped motive on “Ach! kreuzige bei mir” (“Ah! crucify [all forbidden desires] in me”), are much more obvious to the eye than to the ear. While this kind of subtlety would not be noticed by the town council members in the congregation, it does testify to Bach’s faithfulness to the expression of text regardless of its impression on his listeners.

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In the first two movements of Cantata 23, Bach again paints the text in ways too subtle to be perceived by the casual listener, but the expression is powerful nonetheless. In the first movement, a duet for soprano and alto, the soloists sing the opening text, “Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn” (“You true God and Son of David”), in strict canon at the fifth with the soprano leading the canon in the first section and the alto leading in the final section (Figure 4). Bach uses this canonic process to illustrate the theology implied by the text: just as the melodic lines are simultaneously the same and yet different, so is Christ simultaneously man and God.¹² In the second movement recitative, the tenor soloist sings words that might have come from the mouth of Bartimaeus, “Ach, gehe nicht vorüber” (“Ah!, do not go past”). Simultaneously, the first violins and oboes *d’amore* slowly play the first phrase of the chorale “Christe, du Lamm Gottes,” the German version of the Agnus Dei. Thus, the implied text “Have mercy on us” from the chorale is superimposed on the words of the blind beggar who

actually did ask Christ to have mercy on him. However, the chorale melody is played so slowly in such a low register that only the most attentive listener would recognize it, much less notice the allusion.

At the end of the third movement Bach wrote “Il fine.” It is unclear just when he changed his mind and decided to add another movement. Christoph Wolff offers compelling arguments that Bach did compose the fourth movement in time to be included in the 1723 audition performance, not in 1724 as was long believed.¹³ Even though he apparently composed it in haste, he must have been satisfied with the outcome; in 1725 he used it as the final movement of the second performance of the *St. John Passion*. (It was removed for the 1730 performance, and the original closing chorale, “Ach Herr, laß dein lieb Engelein,” was restored for the fourth and final performance.)

The fourth movement is a choral setting of the same chorale heard in the second movement, “Christe, du Lamm Gottes.” Here, as it is stated fully, the appropriateness of this particular chorale becomes clear: the first two text phrases end with “erbarm dich unser” (“have mercy on us”) just as Bartimaeus cried out twice for mercy in the Gospel text. Each of the text phrases is treated differently. The first is an *adagio* in G minor with the oboes used as *obligato* instruments. The second shifts to an *andante* tempo in B \flat major stating the chorale melody in a three-voice canon between

Figure 3. Bach cantata 22, movement 4, tenor aria

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sopranos, oboes, and first violins. The third retains the new key and tempo but eliminates the canon, reinforcing the melody with first violins. The final phrase of the chorale, "Amen," is unusual in that it modulates to the supertonic. In Bach's setting the movement concludes gently and somewhat inconclusively with a Picardy third in C major. Liturgically speaking, it is an effective ending, as the communion service for this penitential Sunday would flow quite naturally from it. What a difference, though, from Graupner's brilliant finish with trumpets and timpani and the congregation standing and singing along!

Public reaction to Bach's audition cantatas was favorable, with a newspaper report eight days later stating that the music was "amply praised on that occasion by all knowledgeable persons."¹⁴ The councillors were not impressed enough, however, and remained with their decision to hire Graupner; it was not until March 23, six weeks later, that he withdrew his application. On April 9, the council was obviously unhappy with their limited choice, now down to three remaining applicants: Bach, Schott, and Kaufmann. Councillor Platz at that meeting probably voiced the opinion of the whole council when he said, "since the best man cannot be obtained, mediocre ones will have to be accepted."¹⁵ After Bach secured his release from Prince Leopold, four days later they seem to have become resigned to their choice, and the vote to accept him on April 22 was unanimous.¹⁶

The musical score is arranged in systems. The first system includes Oboe I and II, Soprano, Alto, and Continuo. The Soprano and Alto parts have the following lyrics: "Du wah - - rer Gott und and / Thou ve - - ry God". The Continuo part includes figured bass notation: "Fine 6b/4/2, 6/5, 7/5". The second system continues the vocal lines with lyrics: "Da - vids - Sohn, / Da - vid's - Son, / Gott und Da - vids - Sohn, / God and Da - vid's - Son,". The Continuo part includes figured bass notation: "7 5 7 9b 8 6 7 (forte) 6b/4/2, 6, 6, b, 6/5". The third system features a piano accompaniment with triplets and the lyrics: "du wah - rer Gott und Da - vids - / Thou ve - ry God and Da - vid's -". The Continuo part includes figured bass notation: "(piano) 6, 6, 7, 6/5, 7, 7, 5, 6/4/3, 7/5". The fourth system continues the piano accompaniment and vocal lines with lyrics: "Sohn, der du von - E - - wig - keit in der Ent - fer - / Son, Thou who, ere - A - - dam was, or time had yet / Da - vids - Sohn, der du von - E - - wig - keit / Da - vid's - Son, Thou who, ere - A - - dam was". The Continuo part includes figured bass notation: "9b 8 6 6 6 7 4 4 8 7 4 3".

Figure 4. Bach cantata 23, movement 1, soprano/alto duet

Conclusion

A look at the four audition cantatas together shows that Bach and Graupner approached their auditions in different ways. Graupner showed off his ability to write in a variety of different styles that let the chorus and soloists shine. Taken as a whole, his cantatas start off with subdued, conservative writing and then add trumpets and timpani for an exciting finish. Bach, on the other hand, wrote deeply meaningful music that becomes more impressive with repeated hearings and study. Music this complex was losing favor in the late baroque period, and indeed, by the time of Bach's death, his music was considered old-fashioned. His relationship with the town council never improved, and in his 1730 letter to Erdmann he complained that "the authorities [in Leipzig] are odd and little interested in music, so that I must live amid almost continual vexation, envy, and persecution."¹⁷ Fortunately for Western civilization, Bach's legendary problems with the council did not prevent him from composing some of his greatest masterpieces during his tenure in Leipzig, including the Magnificat, the B-Minor Mass, the Passions, and, of course, many more sacred cantatas.

NOTES

¹ Christoph Wolff, "Bach, Johann Sebastian," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980), 794.

² As was the custom in eighteenth-century Lutheran churches, when two cantatas or a two-part cantata were performed, the first occurred between the reading of the Gospel and sermon, and the second immediately followed the sermon.

³ Christoph Wolff, "Bach's Audition for the St. Thomas Cantorate: The Cantata, 'Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn,'" *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 130.

⁴ Although there is no way to be certain about which cantata was performed first, it seems logical that *Aus der Tiefen*, with its direct Gospel quotation, would have immediately followed the Gospel reading. In addition, the concluding chorale of *Lobet den Herrn* is a logical conclusion to the pair.

⁵ Interestingly, Bach used the same chorale

verse to close the cantata he composed for the second Sunday of Epiphany three years later, *Meine Seufzer, meine Tränen* (BWV 13).

⁶ Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, ed. *The Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1972), 88.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 125.

⁹ The title "Estomih!" comes from the first two words of the Roman Catholic Mass for that Sunday: "Esto mihi in Deum protectorem." More recently it has been called Quinquagesima Sunday because it falls approximately fifty days before Easter.

¹⁰ The order of the two cantatas is unknown, but, like Graupner's *Aus der Tiefen*, Cantata 22 contains a Gospel quotation in the first movement and thus likely followed the Gospel reading. In addition, Cantata 22 addresses the first half of the Gospel story and Cantata 23 the second half.

¹¹ See Wolff, "Bach's Audition," p. 134 for a detailed explanation.

¹² Helmuth Rilling expressed a similar interpretation of the canonic "Et in unum Dominum" duet from Bach's B-Minor Mass. The duet is also for soprano and alto, is also accompanied by two oboes d'amore, and also deals with the dual nature of Christ with the text "And (I believe) in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God."

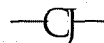
¹³ Wolff, "Bach's Audition," 131-134.

¹⁴ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵ *Bach Reader*, 88.

¹⁶ Ibid., 90.

¹⁷ Ibid., 125



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