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Bach cantatas and motets: *Aus der Tiefen* and beyond

The cantata *Aus der Tiefen*, BWV131, is arguably one of Bach's first masterpieces of church music, written when he was 22 or 23. It is based on Psalm 130, a cry from the depths of despair, and is stylistically different from most of his later cantatas: the sections flow together with only slight breaks, and there are no recitatives. This review of several new recordings of this piece also considers other recent interpretations of Bach's cantatas and motets.

Marcel Ponsele and Il Gardellino's recording of BWV131 and Christoph Graupner's *Aus der Tiefen rufen wir, De Profundis* (Passacaille 969, rec 2010, 58') competes with Ponsele's own 1991 Ricercar performance of the same work, as oboist, in the Ricercar Consort led by Erik van Nevel. That reading was superlative, but it is evidently out of print. This new one of BWV131 sounds brighter, in large part because it is performed in A minor rather than G minor, causing different effects with the string and vocal parts. This piece exhibits the *Chorton/Cammerton* distinction from Mühlhausen: Bach's parts for the strings and voices are in G minor, but the oboe is treated as a transposing instrument playing in A minor. If the oboe part is transposed down, some of the low notes become unplayable and must be recomposed. If all the other parts are transposed up, the strings and voices sound more brilliant (not necessarily an asset in this piece), and the tenor and bass solos have some especially high notes. One recording that preserves Bach's dual-key scheme is by the Purcell Quartet (Chandos, 2005); there may be others.

In comparing Ponsele's new recording against his own earlier work, the differences are fascinating. The performance led by van Nevel had one singer per part, generally slower tempos and a darker key; Ponsele adds several ripieno singers, and has the transposed orchestra. It sounds as if he also uses a different edition. Ponsele's bass soloist sings 'So du willst' instead of 'So du willst' in his aria, and everyone sings 'Aus der Tiefe' (instead of 'Tiefen') in the first movement. The booklet librettos, the *Bach-Gesellschaft* and some other scores, have 'willst' and 'Tiefe', reflecting that edition's 19th-century modernization of Bach's dialect. Many other recorded performances, following the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* and other recent editions, restore earlier quirks in the words, but they also transpose the whole piece to A minor and alter its basic

character. This is an area where the *NBA* did not necessarily do 'the right thing' in its general editorial policies—do the 20th-century assumptions of modern instruments, equally tempered keyboards and simplified clefs still hold, given the skill levels and information available to today's period-performance specialists? The *NBA*'s transpositions of parts or entire scores overrule Bach's choices of keys and the corresponding *Affekt*, which could be just as important as the words.

In Graupner's composition, again compared with van Nevel's pioneering recording, Ponsele's performance is more flexible and emphatic. This also appears to be the only currently available recording. (Graupner's autograph score and parts of this important work are available for free download from the International Music Score Library Project <imslp.org>.) This was one of Graupner's three audition scores, as he successfully applied for the Leipzig position that eventually, and most famously, went to the council's next choice, Bach.

Ponsele's ensemble performs these pieces with two or three singers per 'choral' part, adding ripienists. The blend is exceptionally fine, and the delivery is graceful. Bach's *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ*, BWV177, similarly gets a performance with strong *Affekt* and buoyant motion. The present release is the second in a projected series of five, and the booklet's interview with Ponsele explains his personal aims for these thematically focused CDs (no.1, Desire; no.2, Liberation; no.3, Lamentation; no.4, Sorrow; no.5, Death). 'This series of recordings must testify to the way we approach Bach at the beginning of the 21st century, and above all the manner in which we attempt to pass on to the receptive soul the universal message which shines out from the music of Bach.' Interestingly, the ensemble did not use ripienists in the works on disc no.1 (cantatas BWV32, BWV49 and BWV154, plus a motet by Johann Christoph Bach).

Ponsele has recorded and performed BWV131 not only with van Nevel, but also with Herreweghe (in G minor), Koopman, Suzuki, *et al.* That makes an interesting comparison between these recordings, since all have the same star oboist. For his own recording, bringing all this varied experience to the piece, Ponsele has chosen the path of the transposed orchestra, the older German dialect, eleven singers instead of four or 16–20, and a less 'conducted' interpretation. I compared ten recordings, with and without Ponsele's participation, and rated this new one among the best. I eagerly anticipate Il Gardellino's remaining three volumes.

On *Cantatas 'Aus der Tiefen' BWV131 & 'Himmelskönig, sei willkommen' BWV182* (Oehms Classics oc 783, rec

2010, 47'), Thomas Gropper directs a considerably larger chorus, the Arcis-Vocalisten München, with the Baroque orchestra L'Arpa Festante. The performance exhibits careful preparation and good balances. In BWV131, performed in A minor, the rhythmic and dynamic expression sometimes seems studied and cautious, rather than naturally flowing from the music and words. This is perhaps a side-effect of needing to control so many musicians. The ensemble seems a bit nervous, rushing the first movement at several places. The bass and tenor soloists also have a few small mishaps of intonation. On the whole, though, the performance is impressive.

Gropper's singers and players all sound more comfortable with the style in the second cantata, *Himmelskönig, sei willkommen*, BWV182. As the booklet notes point out, this was Bach's first cantata for Weimar, and his exploration of a more Italianate pseudo-operatic structure. This is the more successful half of the disc, in my opinion, with a fine balance between sprightliness and control. The orchestra plays alertly, and the recorder player must be singled out for handling the treacherous solos (where Harnoncourt opted for a transverse flute in the alto aria). Still, a comparison with Eric Milnes's superlative recording of BWV182 (Atma, 2007), and with the Purcell Quartet (Chandos, 2007), shows what is missing here: fluid rhetorical delivery of the musical figures. These principles of expressivity are well explored in the late Bruce Haynes's book, *The end of early music* (New York, 2007). Pierlot and Koopman (amongst others) have also done very well with this cantata. Against such competition, the musicianship of Gropper's ensemble is fine, and I would say it is above average among the eleven recordings I compared, but my favourites remain these others.

Sigiswald Kuijken and La Petite Bande continue their projected 20-CD series in which they record one Bach cantata for each Sunday or high feast of the liturgical year. The present review includes **Cantatas for the complete liturgical year vol.6** (Accent ACC 25306, rec 2007, 56'), **Cantatas for the complete liturgical year vol.7** (Accent ACC 25307, rec 2007, 65'), **Cantatas for the complete liturgical year vol.9** (Accent ACC 25309, rec 2008, 77'), **Cantatas for the complete liturgical year vol.10** (Accent ACC 25310, rec 2008, 74'), **Cantatas for the complete liturgical year vol.11** (Accent ACC 25311, rec 2009, 56'), **Cantatas for the complete liturgical year vol.12** (Accent ACC 25312, rec 2009, 70'), and **Cantatas for the complete liturgical year vol.13** (Accent ACC 25313, rec 2009, 60'). The cantatas are BWV18, 23 and 1 (vol.6); BWV20, 2 and 10 (vol.7); BWV61, 36, 62 and 132 (vol.9); BWV108, 86, 11 and 44 (vol.10); BWV67, 85 and 12 (vol.11); BWV138, 27, 47 and

96 (vol.12); and BWV249 and 6 (vol.13). Each disc typically represents three or four Sundays; an exception is volume 13, which has the Easter Oratorio, BWV249, for Easter Sunday and BWV6 for Easter Monday.

Each release has two trilingual booklets (German, English and French). One is a didactic treatise about the series as a whole, with topics including form, metre, poetry, and vocal and instrumental forces. These removable booklets remain similar to one another, with only minor details adjusted as the series progresses. The second booklet in each volume is glued into the cardboard package, and includes Kuijken's detailed analysis of each composition, along with librettos and biographical sketches of the performers. All of this is thorough and insightful. This series is an outstandingly good way to learn about these compositions, if the aim is to grasp them intellectually by reading. The only misstep that I see in the production is that the booklets, the album spines and the CDs do not always match in the sequence of compositions presented. When following along with the written notes, it is sometimes necessary to jump to a different part of the booklet.

In these seven individual discs, mezzo-soprano Petra Noskaiová takes all of the alto parts, and baritone Jan Van der Crabben all the bass. Christoph Genz is the tenor, except for vol.6 (Marcus Ullmann). The soprano parts are sung by Siri Thornhill, Gerlinde Sämann or Yeree Suh. There is no separate chorus. As Kuijken explains in the series booklets: 'Ultimately this music can show its true face only if performed by soloists. Since the "conductor" in the modern sense is dispensable in that kind of performance (I conduct, where necessary, from the first violin), these cantatas and related pieces gain greatly in terms of collective devotional power.'

The essay about the continuo group presents Kuijken's convictions about using a shoulder-held *violoncello da spalla* with a strap instead of a conventional cello held between the legs. That distinction is interesting, although I do not hear much difference in the resulting sound. The continuo keyboard is a small organ playing almost all the time on only an 8' flute stop. It all blends well in these performances, but sometimes I wish the bass-line could have been played with more incisive bite and presence, using either a stronger stroke from the bowed instruments, or bringing in a harpsichord for more dramatic and percussive thrust. There is evidence that Bach prepared separate harpsichord parts for at least some of the cantatas presented here: BWV6 (vol.13), BWV23 (vol.6) and BWV27 (vol.12), according to Laurence Dreyfus in his book *Bach's continuo group: players and practices in his vocal works* (Cambridge, MA, 1987). Every director of

a Bach cantata performance may make practical and tasteful choices, of course, omitting an instrument if it is not available, but in a series as scrupulous about musicological details as this one, I would have expected to hear all the parts Bach wrote.

The performances are uniformly well prepared, with playing and singing full of consistent detail. Especially when listening on headphones, it is easy to find the position of each player or singer, as if this were a private performance for a seat in the middle of the ensemble. This clarity is welcome for one who wants to take in all the complexity of Bach's compositions cerebrally. *Wer sich selbst erhöht*, BWV47 (vol.12), is a fair case to illustrate this. In this performance, it is easy to follow any or all of the ten parts of the opening chorus at once, as they are presented with equal value, none distracting from any other. Every line has an expert solo musician, and all are evenly balanced. It follows that a good score-reader hardly need hear the performance at all, because nothing numinous or surprising presents itself; we get only all the facts of the score, played and sung accurately. The second movement, 'Wer ein wahrer Christ will heissen' (for soprano), has a violin solo where some scores specify organ obbligato. Having made that choice, Kuijken himself plays every articulation mark and double stop in the difficult part precisely as the page says. A detailed paragraph in the booklet tells us about the word-painting and rhetoric in this clever composition, and while it is intellectually impressive, the performance does not make it jump out as immediately meaningful. So goes the rest of this cantata, about Jesus's humility, where the text is delivered with such deference that it could have been about anything, or nothing.

Throughout this Kuijken series from its beginning (2005), I have often wished for a stronger sense of spontaneity, spiritual presence or emotional focus. The neutrality has become a defining feature of the series. Everything is so cleanly scrubbed and so careful, so polite and objective with understated gestures, that it does not communicate the meaning of the words as strongly as it might have. I want the music to grab and surprise me, to bypass my intellect, to compel me to take in the immediate didactic content and emotion of the words. It could sound grittier and more human. Another example will suffice to show this. In the first tenor aria of *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*, BWV20 (vol.7), the text asserts a fear of eternity, a terrified quaking in the face of torment, and Bach used notes to illustrate the crackling flames of Hell . . . but the performance gives us little beyond the perfectly delivered notes, without fear. The ensuing

recitative for bass continues to tell us of damnation and eternal misery, with a delivery that sounds genteel and emotionally neutral. A later bass aria within BWV20 admonishes the listener to wake up from sin before the trumpet of judgement. The trumpet playing and the singing are technically astonishing, but this probably would not awaken or put a fear of God into anyone.

Sometimes, for all the clarity in these recordings, I get the impression that Bach himself was partly at fault for writing music that is too busy and complicated. There is so much going on at once that no clear message can emerge. If the primary aim is to make cognitive sense of those simultaneous sounds, not merely blasting the listener with overwhelming complexity, the choruses are well served by having only four singers and such precise diction. These movements play to La Petite Bande's strength: the carefully rehearsed balancing of all the instrumental and vocal parts. That is to say, this ensemble does provide one viable solution to the problem of Bach's condensed music.

As noted above, from the booklet's essays, the interpretative profile is a definite choice by Kuijken. He has chosen not to conduct, in the sense of imposing a more subjective interpretation. I wish, however, that more of the advertised 'collective devotional power' would emerge. Is all of this music supposed to sound as mellifluous, poised and unchallenging as it does in this series of recordings? I am glad to have these discs for the analyses and the lucid textures, helping me to understand what Bach was up to, but I want to be more profoundly moved or shocked by the music than is the case here. For comparison, within the one-singer-per-part approach, I find the music more exciting and immediate in recordings by Montréal Baroque, The Purcell Quartet, the Ricercar Consort and the Theatre of Early Music.

Thus, at the end of listening to all seven Kuijken discs here, I wanted to hear more personalized risk-taking. Bach's parishioners probably only heard this music once in their lives, and the message had to reach them from the distance of the balcony. Therefore, it demanded immediate emphasis to make its point: more exaggeration, more disorderly conduct, and sometimes a dose of deliberate ugliness to match the text, as the older Harnoncourt/Leonhardt series of recordings often brought out so vividly.

Does the music still need a performer's distinctive interpretation to make its effect today, given that one can replay a CD to hear and contemplate any details? That is a valid aesthetic problem. Given the discs here, and Kuijken's recent recording of the Bach cello suites on his *violoncello da spalla*, Kuijken now seems to be in the camp

that deliberately favours understatement, whereas his recordings of Bach's instrumental music 30 years ago were more vigorous. It reminds me of Keith Jarrett's recordings of Bach, in which Jarrett declared and demonstrated, 'This music does not need my assistance . . . The very direction of the lines, the moving lines of notes are inherently expressive. Without the consciousness of what these lines really represent, one may feel that it needs an expressive addition . . . The way the notes of a fugue follow each other cannot be predicted. But they have to follow certain laws. If you add something to make the fugue *more valuable*, you destroy these laws. When I play Bach, I do not hear the music, I hear almost the process of thought. Any colouration has nothing to do with this process, one contributes only one's own emotions. That may sound quite nice for a moment, but then the entire *thought* is gone.' (Notes to Jarrett's 1987 recording of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 1.)

This brings us to another diligent musician with a rather similar non-interventionist approach, Masaaki Suzuki. His complete series continues with **Cantatas, vol.48** (BIS BIS-SACD-1881, *rec* 2010, 72'). The front cover mistakenly advertises cantata 48 instead of 34; the disc actually includes cantatas BWV34, 117, 98 and 120. As usual with this series, the tempos are generally fleet and the phrasing streamlined. Compared with other interpreters who also use period instruments and a chorus of about 12 singers, for example Koopman and Gardiner, Suzuki's approach is less overtly dramatic. One might say it is more 'devotional', while it also has plenty of punch in the lively parts. In that way, his approach is similar to Herreweghe's. The strengths are considerable, with immaculate preparation, dependability, an exuberant joy that comes out when the music merits it, and excellent sound in the recording. Suzuki's own harpsichord continuo improvisations are marvellous in the recitatives and arias. He makes effective use of both organ and harpsichord throughout these recordings.

At the risk of making this sound like a lukewarm recommendation, collectors of Suzuki's series will already know if they want volume 48, knowing what they already know of the dependable interpretative profile. I myself prefer listening to an approach that makes the music more bumpy and eventful. I did a direct comparison with several other recordings in the first cantata here, *O ewiges Feuer*, BWV34. Gardiner's performance from the *Bach Cantatas Pilgrimage* (2000) has a similarly long-lined drive, but stronger dynamic and tempo contrasts than Suzuki's. Leonhardt's (Sony, 1996, also included in the 2008 'Leonhardt Jubilee Edition' box) has much

more interesting articulation and variation within phrases, and this makes the music seem more continuously alive. Suzuki has especially fine solo singing and impeccable togetherness of ensemble, but, to my ears, his interpretations tend to be too predictable, where I would rather be surprised and delighted. I am glad to have this new disc anyway, especially for *Gott, man lobet dich in der Stille*, BWV120. It has a chorus that Bach later rearranged as the 'Et exspecto' section of the B Minor Mass, and an aria that is related to a movement from the sixth sonata for violin and harpsichord. In this cantata, where the music already has much going on within it, Suzuki's straightforward and moderate way is to let it (seem to) play itself. Given the commercial success of this series, such an approach appears to be what many listeners want.

Finally, moving on from the cantatas, we have three new recordings of Bach's six motets. These discs show three approaches to the music that are radically different from one another. **Die Motetten BWV225–230** (Gramola 98875, *rec* 2008/9, 65') is performed by the Austrian ensemble Chorus Sine Nomine under the direction of Johannes Hiemetsberger, who founded it 20 years ago. The booklet lists the names of all 53 singers, a very large group, but it says nothing about the continuo team. A quiet organ, a cello and (I believe) also a string bass occasionally double some of the vocal parts, discreetly keeping the singers centred on pitch but without adding much to the effect. The tempos and balances bring no surprises. It is the type of performance that any community chorus or large professional chorus would be proud of, with fine diction, sensible shaping of dynamics, steady tempo, a blend within each section (most of the time) and good control of balance across sections. The problems are few, and not unexpected in a group this big. There is occasional flat intonation by the sopranos and tenors where the parts have a high tessitura. The metre sometimes seems too steady, probably in the interest of keeping everyone together cleanly enough. My overall impression is that the music seems plain and pleasant here, but nothing special. This is respectable as a published recording, and it might be more desirable to people who have a personal connection with these singers or their anonymous accompanists.

I found the next disc of Bach motets considerably more enjoyable: **Complete motets** (Musica Omnia MO 0403, *rec* 2011, 75'), performed by Trinity Wall Street ensemble under the direction of Julian Wachner. Trinity Wall Street is an Anglican church in New York City, well publicized through an unfortunate non-religious and

non-musical circumstance. Its organ and part of the sanctuary were damaged on September 11, 2001, the church being so near the former site of the World Trade Center (the organ is being salvaged, cleaned and rebuilt in another church during 2011–12). The present CD was released as part of the tenth-anniversary commemoration of the losses in 2001.

The church supports a professional choir and orchestra, directed by Julian Wachner. The booklet lists 31 singers, although not all of them sing in every piece. The period-instrument orchestra includes oboes, bassoon, trumpets, cornetto and trombones, along with strings and organ, to double the vocal parts tastefully and to add dramatic emphasis (as Herreweghe, Suzuki and others have done). Wachner's performances sound like a defiant and joyous celebration of life, befitting the occasion of the commemoration. *Fürchte dich nicht*, BWV228, seems to me a bit too fast and perfunctory, but all of the others are strong and satisfying. There is a seventh piece included, *O Jesu Christ, meins Lebens Licht*, BWV118; Bach labelled it as a motet, but it has independent instrumental parts. The cogent commentary in the booklet is by producer Peter Watchorn, and the cover art also commands attention. It is part of a painting by William Blake depicting two angels, where their wings come together and look like a prayer gesture of the hands.

Finally, my personal favourite among the motet recordings is also the most minimalistic. On **Jesu, Meine Freude: Motets** (Ramée RAM 0906, rec 2009, 70'), Peter Kooij directs Sette Voci, which (despite its name) has eight singers, not seven. There is one singer per vocal line, and not all of the pieces need everyone. The performance includes organ and violone as discreet continuo support, although they are sometimes *tacet*. There is obvious overlap here between Kooij's and Suzuki's present projects: four singers from Kooij's ensemble—Hana Blažiková, Robin Blaze, Satoshi Misukoshi and Kooij himself—are the four *concertists* in Suzuki's volume 48, as section leaders of his 16-voiced ensemble. However, the musical effect is quite different, and not only in matters of instrumentation or vocal deployment. As director, Kooij brings more rhythmic freedom and expression to the music. Where Suzuki generally keeps things moving along briskly in Bach's music, streamlining the structure, Kooij chooses some daringly slower tempos, and gets his singers to provide a more rhetorical and dynamic delivery. The effect here in the motets is intimate, like a group gathered to sing at a friend's funeral. The compositions sound pure and direct, with nothing distracting from the shaping of the text.

This excellent CD also includes a bonus, the motet *Ich lasse dich nicht*, BWV Anhang 159. It is evidently an early piece by Bach, written between 1712 and 1713, and had not yet been authenticated by the 19th century; hence its different place within the *Bach-Gesellschaft* edition, and the Schmieder/BWV numbers based on it. From Kooij's ensemble, Satoshi Misukoshi, Dominik Wörner and Damien Guillon also recorded this piece (and all the motets) with Suzuki in 2009. That performance has more elaborate instrumentation doubling the parts, and is predictably faster, smoother and more extroverted.

All of the discs here, taken together, show quite a range of interpretative style. All are using period instruments or copies, and singers who well meet the modern 'early music' standards of tone and expression. Yet, in matters of numbers, key, instrumentation and in apparent philosophy of rhetorical delivery (or not), the listener still has a wide variety of choices to make. As always, Bach's music gives us space to experiment as musicians, and plenty to contemplate.

Websites

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