***CHRISTMAS ORATORIO* & BWV82**
**PROGRAM NOTES**
**By Chris Shepard**

# BWV82: Ich habe genug

Over the years, I have had the pleasure of hearing Kevin Deas sing many times. In many ways he is the "oratorio bass-baritone" of his generation, singing with innumerable major choirs and orchestras throughout the United States and around the world—to say nothing of his operatic roles, especially as the title character in *Porgy and Bess***.** But it was in a performance of the *St Matthew Passion* in Mexico City (including many singers from the Worcester Chorus) that I decided I *must* perform Bach with Kevin at some point. Here we finally are, more than a decade together, in a program designed around his spectacular voice, particularly with the inclusion of *Ich habe genug*, the great bass solo cantata.

BWV82 is justifiably one of Bach's most beloved works, cherished for the sheer beauty of the first two arias and the thrill of the final aria. Bach himself must have highly prized this cantata, as he left three versions—for bass, soprano and alto. The earliest bass version, dating from 1727, is perhaps the most appropriate to the Gospel text's speaker. This cantata was written for the feast of the Purification (also called Candlemas, celebrated forty days after Christmas on February 2nd), marking the presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple. In the gospel story, the elderly Simeon prophesies that he won't die until he has seen the Messiah. When he holds Jesus in his arms, he prays the prayer that is known as the *Nunc dimittis* in the Roman liturgy, beginning "Lord lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace… for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation." The welcoming of death as release from the difficulties of this world is a recurring theme in Lutheran theology and the music of J.S. Bach, and there is a sense in this cantata that only Bach could have done this text justice.

The first aria is a haunting duet between the oboe and bass, reminiscent of "Erbarme dich" from the *St Matthew Passion*. Its musical theme encapsulates the yearning for release expressed in the text. The central aria is a beautiful lullaby, combining the idea of death as sleep with a more urgent middle section in which the singer rejects the world. The closing aria has a completely different character; it is a breathless gigue in which a resurrection-style upwards motive represents the soul's ultimate release in death.

# *Christmas Oratorio*

**Background**

In roughly 1734, Johann Sebastian Bach decided to write oratorios for some of the major festivals of the church year. This decision led to the composition of both the *Ascension Oratorio* and the *Easter Oratorio*, as well as the *Christmas Oratorio*. Similar to a work such as the monumental *B Minor Mass*, the *Christmas Oratorio* contains a combination of newly composed material as well as previously written and reworked sections. This process is in keeping with the encyclopedic nature of Bach's later works. While the word "parody" tends to have a comedic connotation in modern day usage, this process of reworking and reusing earlier material was quite a common practice in the Baroque era, especially for Bach and Handel. Certain movements were simply too good to be performed only once! Bach reworked major portions of two cantatas for use in the *Christmas Oratorio* (BWV 213 and 214), secular cantatas likely written for a specific occasion and typically receiving only one performance. The Worcester Chorus performed these two cantatas last year, and we have been deeply struck by their similarities in rehearsing the *Christmas Oratorio.*

This work, written for the celebration of Christmas at Leipzig in 1734-1735, is actually a compilation of six free-standing, but linked cantatas, one for each of the six feast days between Christmas Day and Epiphany. The foundation of the text is provided by biblical narrative which describes the Nativity of Jesus up to the coming of the Three Wise Men, using the prescribed Gospel lessons for Christmastide, divided into six separate scenes. While a definitive author of the text is unknown, clues in the score lead scholars to suppose that the poet Picander had a strong hand in its writing, as he often worked in close cooperation with Bach himself. The emphasis of the oratorio is on narration and contemplation, as opposed to action. The tenor Evangelist narrates the story, while the soloists and choir reflect upon the story in the arias, choruses, and chorales which are intertwined throughout.

Although Bach strings together these six cantatas as an "oratorio", this is not an oratorio in the same sense as the Handel oratorios with which we are all familiar. Each cantata is designated for a different day in the Christmas season, with the first three landing on December 25, 26 and 27. Cantatas IV and V are for New Year's Day and the Sunday afterwards, and the final cantata is for Epiphany, usually associated with the Wise Men.

Performing the *Christmas Oratorio* outside of the liturgy presents several problems. With each cantata lasting roughly twenty-five minutes (plus an interval), the whole presentation is about three hours. While that is not insurmountable, another problem of pacing also exists. As we are finding in THE COMPLETE BACH, each cantata's shape is carefully paced with a beginning, middle and ending, so six of these cantatas in row can feel like a *dégustation* menu in which the courses are too large! So, we have opted to follow a German tradition, in which a selection of the cantatas are performed rather than all six. The selection of cantatas for our 2026 performance is practical: we wanted to highlight guest bass Kevin Deas, so these are the three cantatas that feature the primary bass arias.

The first cantata is more Advent in content than Christmas, and deals with Zion preparing itself (as a bride) for the coming of the Messiah. The third cantata is more reflective, pondering on the meaning of the birth, springing from the verse "Mary pondered all of these things in her heart." We resume the narrative in the fifth cantata, following the Wise Men on their pilgrimage to the manger.

**Lutheran Christmas**

In an era in which the sacred "Christmas" (as opposed to the secular Santa and shopping) has become synonymous with the crèche scene, it can be difficult to understand the often-subtle differences between our concept of Christmas and the concept of the season as understood by Bach's Lutheran parishioners. The baby is still the same, of course, as are Mary, Joseph, the angels the shepherds and the Wise Men. All of the crèche characters are all the same, and the narrative itself is instantly recognisable.

But what is not the same are the associative meanings of all the story's elements. For Germans not all that far removed from the Medieval period and not at all removed from the plague and war that swept away one-third of the population only a generation or two before Bach, death was more than a metaphor, and the fear of death was all too real. In a society in which death was all-pervasive, conquering death was an extraordinary thing. And in a society in which a single nobleman held the puppet strings of thousands of lives, one would have expected such conquering to come from a king.

In this sense, Lutheran orthodoxy of the 18th century was far closer to the original essence of Christmas than we are today: a child was born to remove the fear of death and to conquer Satan, whose perfidy condemns us to death. For Luther and Bach, "death, devil, sin and hell"—the quartet whose defeat is celebrated in the final movement of the full *Christmas Oratorio*—were indivisible, and were vanquished by the duality of Christ's incarnation and resurrection.

Similarly, the hundreds of crèche scenes that each of us has seen over the years have served to romanticize the image of Jesus' birth, robbing the scene of its original (and literal) filth. A manger is not a sweet, softly-lit, rustic location. A manger is a barn, full of farm animals, manure, cold, rats, fleas and darkness. A king would never set foot inside such a place. It was a place for the lowest of the low, the equivalent of a hobo's boxcar in Depression-era America, or a park bench today. And shepherds were not the quaint pastoralists of modern imagery; they were society's outcasts, spending months at a time in the company of nothing but their sheep, nearly mute, stinking and potentially dangerous.

**Pride and Humility**

Although Bach himself is not above romanticizing the characters in the narrative of his *Christmas Oratorio*, he does maintain the integrity of its theology. The single most significant theme that wends its way throughout the oratorio is the distinction between the humility of Christ and the pride of man. Perhaps the greatest example of this is Bach's use of the royal trumpets and timpani throughout the six cantatas. His parishioners would have instantly recognised this association, and it is no coincidence that so much of *Christmas Oratorio* was refashioned from music originally written to celebrate the birth of the Saxon elector's son. But there is a twist. In the first cantata's bass aria, accompanied by trumpet, the bass sings not to praise earth's royalty, but to mock it: "O great Lord and mighty King… how trifling you regard earthly pomp!" The text juxtaposes God's creation of all of the universe's "splendor and finery" with his acceptance of the "hard manger" for his incarnation.

**Characters in the Christmas Oratorio**

In order to bring out different elements of the story, Bach uses various devices that would have been fully understood by his listeners, but are less clear today. As always, he uses a tenor to be the narrator or "Evangelist", singing biblical passages come from the gospel of Luke. The Evangelist is accompanied by organ and cello.

As Bach's church music is primarily meant to serve as mini-sermons for the congregation, the other soloists' role is to comment upon the narrative. They sing two types of pieces: *accompanied recitatives*, in which the text is free and generally more emotion-laden; and *arias*, which are poetic rather than narrative, and there is much emphasis on personal response to the story. In this sense, the soloists stand in for the individual believer.

But there are other more arcane associations within the arias. In the *Christmas Oratorio*, the bass often sings prophetic recitatives, as the Christmas story has many links with the Old Testament. The alto has a particularly special role in this oratorio, playing the character of Mary. She sings "Schlafe, mein Liebster" as a lullaby to the baby, and after the Evangelist says that "she pondered these things in her heart", an aria follows ("Schliesse, mein Herze") in which she thinks aloud about all she has seen.

Bach's choice of instrumentation, too, is generated by the biblical text. As we have seen, the trumpet represents royalty. The oboe da caccia ("hunting oboe") represents the rustic shepherds. The oboe d'amore is a slightly lower member of the oboe family, and as its name suggests, often represents love. In Bach's cantatas, the oboe d'amore usually suggests God's love for mankind, as we also see in this oratorio. The flute, particularly when playing fast passages, represents the work of the Holy Spirit or in some cases in the *Christmas Oratorio,* the angels or the star.

The choir fulfills several roles. In the larger concerto-like choruses, the choir generally represents the church as a whole, praising God or asking for his help. Three choruses in tonight's performance are part of the Evangelist's narrative. The first is the angels' chorus: "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to men of goodwill." The second, in which the shepherds say to one another that they should follow the star to Bethlehem, contains a musical pun. While the flutes and violins play a semi-quaver in unison throughout, representing the Star of David shining in the sky, the shepherds sing confusedly to one another in canons that move in opposite directions. The third narrative chorus represents the Wise Men, who ask where they might find the King of the Jews. For those of you who know the Passion settings very well, this "Wo, wo" ("where, where") chorus is redolent of the *turba* (crowd) choruses in the Passions. This may be purposeful: the other famous naming of Jesus as "King of the Jews" comes in that Good Friday story.

The other role of the choir is to represent the congregation in the singing of chorales, or hymns. These hymns would have been as instantly recognizable to Bach's congregation as Christmas carols would be to us, even though they probably did not sing the chorales during the choir's performance of the *Christmas Oratorio*. In this way, just as the soloists stand in for the individual believer, the choir stands proxy for the Church itself.

*Chris Shepard, 2026*