

## PROGRAM NOTES

In June 1708, Johann Sebastian Bach resigned from his post in the Thuringian town of Mühlhausen. In an open letter addressed to his parishioners, Bach described how “God has brought it to pass that an unexpected change should offer itself to me, in which I see the possibility of a more adequate living and the achievement of my goal of a well-regulated church music.” Following spells at the courts of Weimar and Cöthen, in 1723 Bach was appointed Cantor and Director of Music at Leipzig’s prestigious Thomasschule, where he would work for the remaining twenty-seven years of his life.

In Leipzig, Bach was able to fulfill his goal. There, he produced both the *Matthew* and *John Passions*, three complete cantata cycles, and at least five authenticated motets—not to mention the organ and instrumental music. Though the motets may be small in number by comparison with his cantatas, they constitute some of the most daring and impressive music ever conceived for vocal ensemble. Scored from five to eight voices, each in its own way demands the highest levels of virtuosity of the singers. Bach uses the voices to synthesize complex musical textures, going far beyond merely “expressing” the words. Rather, through Bach’s seemingly exhaustive musical invention, they present elucidating explorations of the texts, highlighting the underlying spiritual and metaphysical implications they carry.

Bach’s motets are among the relative few of his works that have remained in constant performance since their composition. However, they puzzled 19th-century musicologists, who saw them as somewhat separate from the rest of his output. In his monumental two-volume Bach biography, Philipp Spitta considered the motet only fleetingly. Spitta, one of the protagonists of the Bach revival, described how he perceived the motet:

“The essential stamp and character of the motet are: that it is in several parts, that it admits of no obbligato [i.e. independent] instruments, and that its subjects are set to a text of the Bible or to a verse of a hymn. Hence it follows that the period of its fullest bloom fell within the first great period of art, reaching to about the year 1600, when music was essentially polyphonic, vocal and sacred...”

Spitta goes on to claim that by the beginning of the eighteenth century the motet’s “time was past,” and that “only Sebastian Bach could still have created anything really original and powerful in this branch of music.” However, as more recent musicological research has shown, Bach’s works were part of a long-established German Lutheran polyphonic motet tradition that extended back into the sixteenth century.

They were distinct from the contemporary German and Italian works for solo voices and instruments sometimes referred to by the same label. Bach’s own cousin J.G. Walther (1684 - 1748) provides a succinct definition of the motet in his *Musicalisches Lexicon* (1732). He describes the motet as “a musical composition on a biblical *Spruch* [text, or “saying”], to be sung without instruments (basso continuo excepted), and richly ornamented with *Fugen* and *Imitationibus*.” The emphasis placed on the text reflected one of the key tenets of Lutheran theology—that the word should be the central focus for Christian faith. From the 16th century, the setting of sacred texts to music formed a central part of the Lutheran liturgy, Luther himself extolling that “next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world.”

Another misconception attached to the motets was the notion that they had been intended as training works for Bach’s more junior singers. However, the motets require a significant amount of vocal athleticism across all of their parts, and would most likely have been excessively difficult for the less-experienced singers in Bach’s charge. It was only during the second decade of the 20th century that Bernhard Friedrich Richter challenged this assertion, citing evidence that showed Bach’s motets were, in fact, occasional pieces that had been specifically composed to commemorate a variety of special events.

As suggested by Walther, 17th- and 18th-century motets are often highly contrapuntal—that is to say, made up of audibly independent vocal lines that are carefully designed to complement one another. Throughout Bach’s motets, the listener can hear how the text is apparently “discussed” between the voices, as if a meaning is being worked out collectively. They often combine scriptural and contemporary poetic texts, with the latter offering a sort of commentary on the former. As such, the motets are often extremely demanding, for listeners and performers alike.

*Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied* (BWV 225) opens with an incredibly florid section, which clearly plays on the idea of the eight singers literally singing about singing. It sandwiches the third verse of a chorale text by Johann

Gramann, thought to have been written around 1530, between verses from Psalms 149 and 150. While this motet was almost certainly composed sometime between June 1726 and April 1727, the actual occasion it was intended for remains unknown. Various possibilities have been suggested by scholars, including a Reformation feast day, the New Year's Day service, the birth of Princess Charlotte von Anhalt-Cöthen (30 November 1726), or a funeral service for a prominent Leipzig burgher. Regardless, *Singet dem Herrn* remained in the repertoire of the Leipzig Thomanechor long after Bach's death. Mozart was reported to have been particularly impressed by it after hearing a performance directed by Thomascantor Johann Friedrich Doles in 1789, requesting a copy of the parts from the school's library.

By contrast, the occasion that resulted in the composition of *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf* (BWV 226) is known for certain. It was written for the funeral of Johann Heinrich Ernesti, Rector of the Thomasschule and Professor of Poetry at the University of Leipzig, who died on 16 October 1729. Setting passages from Romans 8 alongside the third verse of Luther's chorale *Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott*, it is scored for double choir and divided into three contrasting sections. The effervescent sixteenth notes of the opening section make a clear allusion to the work of the Holy Spirit, before giving way to a more subdued, prayerful central passage. As a means of conclusion, Bach brings the two choirs together as one, constructing a four-voice fugue based on a theme that audibly evokes the "incommunicable sighs" with which the Spirit intercedes. A set of instrumental parts survives for this motet, hinting that instrumental doubling could have also been employed in the performance of other motets in Leipzig, despite Walther's definition in the *Musicalisches Lexicon*.

Unlike Bach's other motets, *Komm, Jesu, Komm* (BWV 229) contains neither biblical text nor fugal writing. Instead, it sets the first and eleventh verses of a chorale written by Paul Thymich in 1684 for the funeral of Jacob Thomasius, a celebrated rector of the Thomasschule, calling on Jesus to comfort the believer in the advent of death. This work falls into two clear sections, the first a highly elaborate chorus with a significant amount of interaction between the two choirs. The second, given the title "Aria" by Bach, is much more static. Source studies suggest that it was likely composed before or during 1732, and was probably intended for a funeral or memorial service.

In addition to the corpus of those motets that can be verified as Bach's work, a handful of works exists that were previously attributed to the composer, but whose authenticity was called into question. Many of these have been shown to be either by Bach's elder relatives or close contemporaries. *Ich lasse dich nicht* (BWV Anh. 159) is one such case, although its authorship remains uncertain. Indeed, having been considered the work of another composer by the editors of the *Neue Bach Ausgabe*—the authoritative critical edition of Bach's works begun in 1950 and completed in 2007—it has recently been reconsidered as potentially coming from Bach's pen. It was included without attribution in the *Altbachisches Archiv*, an anthology of music by members of the Bach family, which Bach inherited sometime around 1739. This particular motet is transcribed in Bach's own hand. However, it is not obvious whether Bach was appending one of his own original compositions to the collection, or copying one by a relative. Stylistically, with its antiphonal exchanges and more restrained rhythmical patterns, *Ich lasse dich nicht* resembles the work of Johann Christoph Bach (1642-1703), who Sebastian lauded as "a profound composer." However, whether this may be an example of the young Sebastian developing his own compositional voice, offering homage to his elderly relative, or attempting to preserve his family's musical heritage, the authorship remains unclear.

*Jesu, meine Freude* (BWV 227) is the longest and most formally complex of Bach's motets. While the earliest surviving source material we have is an early 19-century manuscript, Spitta's suggestion that the work dates from Bach's time in Leipzig seems likely to be correct—even if, as some scholars have recently suggested, the piece is, in fact, a compilation and adaptation of previously composed works (in a similar manner to the *Credo* of Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, for example).

Made up of eleven discrete movements, it intersperses the six stanzas of Johann Franck's 1653 chorale with texts from Romans 8, as in *Der Geist hilft*. The movements are arranged to form a palindrome around the sixth movement, with the four-voiced harmonization of Johann Crüger's chorale melody heard in the first and the final movements. While Bach frequently illustrates the texts' highly graphic imagery—for instance, at *Trotz dem alten Drachen* (Defy the old dragon)—the five-voice fugue which functions as the motet's center-point is more subtle. Bach's use of this form, whereby each successive voice enters imitating its predecessors, renders an audible sense of egalitarianism. It articulates the motet's principal theological message: *Ihr aber seid nicht fleischlich, sondern*

*Geistlich* (You are not the flesh, but the spirit)—that faithful Christians are equals, as the living embodiment of God's spirit.

—David G. Lee