

BACH 728 - BACH ON SUNDAY

The London Bach Society was formed in 1947 and have performed J. S. Bach's Cantatas in regular concerts around London for over forty years. On this disc the LBS presents some favourite Cantata Movements and Sacred Songs. The selections exhibit many different aspects of Bach's vocal writing, including, in several selections, the varied use Bach makes of the Lutheran chorale. The Solo Arias as heard on this disc are performed by the relevant section of the Choir rather than individual soloists. We feel that the result, being less "personified" than a solo performance, is more suited to our present purpose which is to provide relaxing, sacred music for Sunday listening.

We open however with a cheerful Sinfonia, taken from **Cantata 75**. The trumpet plays the Chorale which is featured throughout the rest of this Cantata, against a background of tuneful and fast moving counterpoint.

The Choir comes in now, with the introductory Chorus from **Cantata 10**, *Meine Seel' erhebt den Herren* (*My Soul doth magnify the Lord*). This is followed by the Alto-Tenor Duet from the same Cantata: *Er denket der Barmherzigkeit*. Bach later arranged this Aria for organ as the Schübler Prelude BWV 648. We move now to **Cantata 93**: *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten* (*Whoso lets God direct his life*) for the Soprano-Alto Duet (No. 4): *Er kennt die rechten Freudenstunden* (*He knoweth the right Hour*) and the final Chorale (No. 7): *Sing' bet' und geh' auf Gottes Wegen* (*Sing, Pray, and follow the Way of God*). The textural beauty created by the combination of unison strings playing the Chorale melody in the middle register with the utterly different yet thematically derived vocal parts is of a rare kind. The contrasting colours make it particularly attractive - Bach evidently felt the same himself for this is yet another model for a Schübler Prelude.

Track 3 features **Cantata 140**: *Wachet auf! - Sleepers Wake!* The Chorale on which this Cantata is based is first stated by the Organ. The Choir then comes in with the Tenor Chorale (No. 4): *Zion hört die Wächten singen* and the Chorale (No. 7): *Gloria sei dir gesungen*. This would reappear as Schübler Prelude BWV 645. This Cantata is based on the parable of the Ten Virgins. The whole work opens with a Chorus, 'Wake, O Wake, Jerusalem, cry the Watchers high upon the walls'. This and the Recitative which follows it are both rousing calls to wake from sloth and run to meet the Bridegroom. Chorale No. 4, recorded here, is Zion's fervent response, set as a lilting dance tune for strings in unison with the unadorned chorale phrases widely separated. The full Chorale No. 7 is a fitting climax to a Cantata in which a spirit of ecstatic mysticism pervades almost every moment. Turning now to **Cantata 143**, *Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele*, the choir performs the soprano chorale (No. 2): *Der Friedefürst, Herr Jesu Christ*. It is unornamented until the last line, when the melodic climax is expanded with characteristic embellishments at the word *Vater* ('Father'). The gently swaying melody of the solo violin obbligato gives the movement a mood of quiet confidence.

Track 4: The Organ solo is the well known Aria "Sheep may safely graze", from **Cantata 208** composed in 1716 for the Birthday of Duke Christian of Sachsen-Weissenfels.

Track 5 on our disc is devoted to **Sacred Songs**. Sixty-nine Chorales with Figured Bass by J. S. Bach were published in *Schmelli's Gesangbuch* in 1736. Of these, only one melody, BWV 505, actually bears Bach's signature: fourteen others are possibly by him. BWV 299: *Dir, dir, Jehova* (*To thee Lord, will I sing*) appeared in the *Clavierbüchlein for Anna Magdalena* (Bach's second wife) in 1725, and it is from this that our setting is taken. In BWV 505: *Vergis mein nicht* (*Forsake me not*), the melody and unfigured bass are Bach's, the realization of the inner parts is based on Wullner. BWV 461: *Gott lebet noch* (*God yet lives, O my Soul*) - the melody dates from 1714, and is not by Bach, though the other vocal parts are almost certainly his. The melody of BWV 478: *Komm süsser Tod* (*Come sweet death*) is probably by J. S. Bach. As an interlude between the Choral selections, we hear *Bist du bei mir*, (*Be Thou with me*), from the second "family music album" Bach prepared for his wife Anna Magdalena.

The haunting oboe melody in the next Sinfonia reflects the mood of **Cantata 21**: *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*, (*My heart was full of sadness*), composed in Weimar, 1714.

Track 7 opens with an Organ movement which is sympathetic in mood to the previous Sinfonia. This is the Sinfonia (Arioso) from **Cantata 156: I stand at the threshold of Death**. It was drawn in 1729 or 1730 from an earlier composition which the listener may recognize as the Slow Movement from the Harpsichord Concerto BWV 1056, itself a “conversion” of an earlier and now lost Violin Concerto probably dating back to Weimar or Cöthen. The Choir follows with the Chorale from **Cantata 147: Herz und Mund und That und Leben**, well known from the large number of popular arrangements, and the standard English version ('*Jesu, joy of man's desiring*'). This is followed by two excerpts from **Cantata 95: Christus, der ist mein Leben**: the Soprano Chorale (No. 2): *Valet will ich dir geben* and the Chorale (No. 6): *Weil du vom Tod erstanden bist*. Here the melody associated in English-speaking countries with the hymn 'All glory, laud and honor', is set in triple time and endowed with exquisite chromatic harmonies. The oboe *d'amore* obbligato and the embellishments of the tune which occur on *wohnen* (*living*) and elsewhere seem to express eagerness to say farewell to the world, but there is an undercurrent of wistfulness in the music too, suggesting perhaps some sadness at leaving the pleasures of the world. The full Chorale is Stanza IV of Herman's hymn *Wenn mein Stundlein vorhanden ist* ('*When my last hour draws nigh*'). Here it is wonderfully enhanced by an independent violin part which soars like a descant far above the vocal and other instrumental parts, as though symbolizing the Soul's ascension to Heaven.

The track concludes with the powerful **Organ Chorale** '*Now thank we all our God*'. Bach's own registration was *Fagotto* in the left hand and *Sesquialtera* in the right, a copy of which was preserved by his cousin J.G. Walther who was present when Bach performed this at the inauguration of the new Organ in Mülhausen.

The organ now resounds with the Chorale Prelude and final Chorale from the mighty Reformation Hymn *Ein' feste Burg* (*A sure stronghold is our God*), used in **Cantata 80**.

We begin **Track 9** with the Opening Chorus from **Cantata 47: Wer sich selbst erhöht**, first performed on October 13th 1726 at Leipzig. This is followed by the Soprano-Alto Duet (No. 2): *Wir eilen mit schwachen doch emsigen Schritten* from **Cantata 78: Jesu, der du meine Seele**. There is no other movement in all the Cantatas that is remotely like this Duet. It is, in a sense, the best 'lollypop' that has ever been written: at the same time, it is profound and sublime. The orchestration is unique - violone pizzicato on the crotchet pulses while the 'cello plays incessant quavers, depicting the text: '*We run with feeble but eager feet, O Jesu, O Master*'. Above this the voices sing a florid melody, mostly in close imitation, which is sometimes running, sometimes pleading, sometimes sighing. From **Cantata 38: Aus tiefer Noth** (*From the depths of despair*) the Choir now performs the Soprano-Alto-Bass Trio (No. 5): *Wenn meine Trübsal als mit Ketten* (*My troubles weigh like chains*). There are very few Trios in the Cantatas; probably the present piece is the most beautiful and contains the greatest amount of interesting detail. Although the basic mood of the text is joyful the music exhibits sharp contrasts: for the Composer writes a sorrowful chromatic theme combined with falling suspended discords for the first idea 'affliction', 'chains' and 'misfortune', then exultant joyful themes (one is first heard in the opening Ritornello) when the text speaks of 'rescue' and 'comfort'. At the climactic phrase "*All (trouble) suddenly falls from me*", the musical phrase is broken by rests as though the singers' emotion caused a catching of the breath.

We bring our Sunday Bach program to a close with the cheerful **Sinfonia in F Major, BWV 1040**.

Michael Meacock

Further Cantata excerpts are available on **BACH 733/ 734 / 748-755: "Soli Deo Gloria", Vols. 1-10**

The London Bach Society was recorded in 1968 by Oryx Sound Studios at St. Vedast Church, London – Producer: Michael Meacock – Recording Engineer: Lawrence Perry