

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 10 September 2021 7.30pm  
Not the Christmas Oratorio

## Solomon's Knot

Zoë Brookshaw, Clare Lloyd-Griffiths soprano

Kate Symonds-Joy, Michał Czerniawski alto

Thomas Herford, Ruairi Bowen tenor

Jonathan Sells, Alex Ashworth bass

George Clifford violin, leader

Ellen Bundy, Gabriella Jones, Maxim Del Mar violin

Joanne Miller, Stefanie Heichelheim viola

Gavin Kibble cello

Jan Zahourek double bass

Eva Caballero, Laura Piras flute

Rachel Chaplin, Robert de Bree oboe, oboe d'amore

Sally Erhardt bassoon

Neil Brough, Will Russell, Gareth Hoddinott trumpet

Rosemary Toll timpani

Kathryn Zevenbergen, Anna Drysdale horn

William Whitehead harpsichord

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten! BWV214 (1733)

Lasst uns sorgen, lasst uns wachen BWV213 (1733)

Preise dein Glücke, gesegnetes Sachsen BWV215 (1734)

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The positively godlike status we give to **Johann Sebastian Bach** as a creative artist can sometimes blind us to the realities of his life as a working musician, a man with a living to earn and a family to provide for. The *Christmas Oratorio* underlines this truth superbly, since some dozen of its numbers were cleverly recycled by their busy and super-resourceful composer from pieces wholly unconnected with the Virgin Birth, the Shepherds or the Wise Men. Tonight we hear these three secular cantatas in their original form. When in 1729 Bach took over the direction of Leipzig's Collegium Musicum, a public concert society bringing together an orchestra of experienced professional performers, it was with the aim of finding a wider, more diverse audience for his music than the congregation of the Thomaskirche for which, as its Kantor, he had composed his superb sacred cantata cycles. For the Collegium's weekly concerts he could harness the talents of performers from the Saxon electoral court at Dresden, on which he was keeping a careful eye as a source of future employment, since Elector Friedrich August III had a genuine passion for music.

In 1719 the prince had married Archduchess Maria Josepha of Austria, and it was for her birthday, on 8 December 1733, that Bach composed *Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten*. The anonymous librettist (perhaps one of the Leipzig university professors patronizing the Collegium) devised the work as an allegorical drama, featuring Pallas and Bellona, goddesses of wisdom and war, the figure of Fame and the spirit of Peace. Each of these offers a celebratory aria, before the closing chorus, 'Blühet, ihr Linden', discreetly commends the Electress's fecundity. Maria Josepha had already produced eight children, was pregnant with her ninth and would give birth to five more.

In this splendid birthday tribute we can sense Bach's delight in the resources at his disposal, as well as his enjoyment of the text's operatic aspects. The exuberance of brass and timpani in the two choral movements bookends a sequence of numbers heightening the character profile of the various soloists. Bellona is more pacific than aggressive with her paired flutes, Pallas is suitably reflective with the help of an oboe d'amore and Fame wields his traditional trumpet in fine style. Was the composer hoping to be drawn in to the lively world of lyric theatre in Dresden at this period? If so, this cantata was an ideal calling card.

Earlier that autumn of 1733, the 5th September marked the birthday of Maria Josepha's third child, Friedrich Christian. At the age of eleven he was already what in those days was called 'a hopeful prince' and as heir to the Saxon throne was being given a serious education. Doubtless this was why the librettist Christian Friedrich Henrici, under his pen name Picander, chose the familiar Greek legend known as 'Hercules At The Crossroads' as the subject of his cantata *Lasst uns*

*sorgen, lasst uns wachen*. The story, as originally narrated by the philosopher Prodicus of Ceos and developed by later classical authors, presents the young hero as facing a choice between a seductive life of pleasure and the more rigorous pursuit of manly virtue. Artists like Raphael and Dürer created famous images of this moral fable and a decade or so after Bach's musical treatment of it, Handel wrote a similar dramatic cantata, *The Choice of Hercules*.

Picander had worked with Bach before, notably on the *St Matthew Passion*, and the composer made use of his religious poetry in the Thomaskirche cantatas. In *Lasst uns sorgen* the librettist imagines Hercules as a childlike avatar of Prince Friedrich Christian and in the opening chorus Bach picks up on the dynasty's hopes for the boy's martial future by including paired horns in the score. Soprano Lust encourages the lad to take some rest, an alluring prospect enough for alto Hercules, made more so by Bach's exploitation of the echo effect referred to in Picander's text. Tenor Virtue, however, is having none of this, urging the hero to soar higher on busy musical wings. The warmth and richness of Bach's string writing here seeds the ground agreeably for the decorous courtly dance which forms the closing chorus.

The last of these festive cantatas, *Preise dein Glücke, gesegnetes Sachsen*, is a lavish commemoration of Elector Friedrich August's coronation as King of Poland in 1734. Leipzig University was determined to mark the occasion as elegantly as possible, so Bach was able to deploy one of his largest orchestras, including three trumpets (one of the trumpeters alas dropped dead after the performance). It was a unique opportunity for using a double chorus, brilliantly bouncing different sections of the choir off one another in a movement of majestic structural complexity. If not as subtle as the two earlier cantatas in driving home the idea of Saxony's good fortune in its Elector, *Preise dein Glücke*, whether in the vigorous bass aria 'Rase nur, verwegner Schwarm' or in the irrepressibly cheerful 'Freilich trotz Augustus' Name', suggests its composer's own pleasure in the very act of music making. Bach had not quite finished, in any case, with these three works, since at least one movement from *Tönet ihr Pauken* turns up again in the Mass in B minor and several others, rescored and adapted, would serve their turn in the six *Christmas Oratorio* cantatas, familiar to modern listeners. It does us good to hear these pieces, so dashing, colourful and inventive, in the worldly contexts for which their creator originally devised them.

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