

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 18 December 2023
7.30pm

Bach Christmas Cantatas and Magnificat

London Handel Players

Adrian Butterfield director, violin
Hilary Cronin soprano
Jessica Cale soprano
Hugh Cutting countertenor
Charles Daniels tenor
Jerome Knox bass

Oliver Webber violin I
Naomi Burrell violin II
Rachel Byrt viola
Sarah McMahon cello
Cecelia Bruggemeyer double bass
Silas Wollston harpsichord, organ
Rachel Brown flute
Katy Bircher flute

Joel Raymond oboe, oboe
d'amore
Oonagh Lee oboe
Nathaniel Harrison bassoon
Neil Brough trumpet
Peter Mankarious trumpet
Katherine Lodge trumpet
Ben Hoffnung timpani

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) *Bereitet die Wege, bereitet die Bahn!* BWV132 (1715)

Süsser Trost, mein Jesus kommt BWV151 (1725)

Gloria in excelsis Deo BWV191 (?1743-6)

Interval

Magnificat in D BWV243 with Christmas interpolations (c.1732-5)



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Christmastide was, unsurprisingly, an especially busy and important time for a church musician in 18th-century Saxony and this programme features works for that time of year, culminating in the work which he wrote for his first Christmas in Leipzig 300 years ago in 1723, the *Magnificat*.

Bereitet die Wege, bereitet die Bahn BWV132

Bach wrote this work in Weimar in 1715 for the fourth Sunday in Advent on 22 December, just three days before Christmas. He had been appointed concertmaster at the court the year before and wrote cantatas once a month.

The text was written by the court poet, Salomo Franck, and the words of the opening soprano aria are a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord', referred to by John the Baptist in the Gospel of the day. The bass aria that follows the tenor recitative takes the question that the priests ask John, 'Who are you?', and turns it into a rather stern one that Jesus asks of us all. An accompanied recitative leads into an alto aria with an obbligato violin part that beautifully depicts an image of flowing baptismal water. The closing chorale is lost, but BWV164 includes a setting of the same text so this will be included instead.

Süsser Trost, mein Jesus kömmt BWV151

Süsser Trost was written for the third day of Christmas in 1725 and was set to a text by Georg Christian Lehms. The opening aria for soprano, flute and strings is an intimate lullaby that provides comfort to the baby Jesus but which also reminds us of the reassurance Jesus's arrival gives to us. It has a sharply contrasted gavotte-like middle section that describes the joy of Jesus's arrival, and this joy is taken up by the bass soloist in the following recitative. The mood changes in preparation for the second, alto aria which is a meditation on the lowliness and humility of Jesus's entry into the world, the singer accompanied by unison upper strings. The opening falling phrases aptly describe Jesus's meekness, but this is then sharply contrasted with a rising seventh for the word 'hope'. The second, tenor recitative that follows reverses the progression of the first and leads into a final celebratory chorale.

Gloria in excelsis Deo BWV191

This work is the only surviving church cantata by Bach set to a Latin text rather than a German one. The manuscript is dated Christmas Day but it is uncertain for which year in the 1740s it was intended. It is a shortened and adapted version of the 'Gloria' section of the *Missa* (Kyrie and Gloria) in *B minor* which Bach had sent to Augustus III, the new Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, in 1733, and which was later to become incorporated into the *B minor Mass* which he completed in his final years.

The opening 'Gloria - Et in terra pax' section is almost identical to the original but the other two movements are parodies of the 'Domine Deus' and 'Cum sancto' with adapted texts and slight changes of form. These modifications, however, were not carried over into the completed *B minor Mass*.

Instead of the usual four-part vocal scoring for his cantatas, this work shares the five-part texture of both the *Missa in B minor* and the *Magnificat*. The inclusion of full sections of wind and brass ensures a wonderful sense of joy and celebration for the day of Jesus's birth.

Magnificat BWV243

The *Magnificat*, Mary's song of praise to God, has been an integral part of evensong in the Christian Church for several centuries. In the Lutheran liturgy of Bach's time it was usually sung by the whole congregation in Luther's German plainchant as part of the Protestant aim to strengthen the relationship between the believer and God through the use of the vernacular. Yet for major feast days it was frequently set to be sung by the choir in Latin, often with an elaborate instrumental accompaniment.

Bach's setting of the *Magnificat* survives in two versions. The first was composed for Vespers on Christmas Day 1723 in Leipzig, soon after his appointment to the post of Kantor there, with four seasonal interpolations. A few years later he revised the score, removing the Christmas music and thus making the work suitable for any festival. He transposed the music from E flat major to D major, replaced the recorders with flutes in 'Esurientes', oboe with oboe d'amore in 'Quia respexit' and trumpet with unison oboes in 'Suscepit Israel'. In tonight's performance we will hear the later D major version, but with the Christmas interpolations.

Bach's setting of the text is masterly. The opening movement employs the largest orchestra available to him and he sets the chorus in five parts rather than the usual four. Beautiful word-painting abounds; he uses a descending phrase to illustrate the word *humilitatem* ('lowliness') in the 'Quia respexit' and in 'Deposuit' there are two complementary phrases, one rising and one falling, to reflect the words *deposuit* and *exultavit*. As in the later *B minor Mass*, Bach avoids full *da capo* structures, rendering the work remarkably concise and dramatic. The last movement, the 'Gloria', starts in dramatic fashion with block chords alternating with rising triplet patterns. The final section follows the long tradition of setting the words 'as it was in the beginning' to a shortened version of the opening music, and brings the work to a rousing conclusion.

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