

PROGRAM NOTES

The so-called "Christmas Oratorio" is a slightly misleading title. Although there is a through narrative of the Christmas story as recounted in the Gospels of the life of Jesus, it is really a collective of six cantatas, first performed in 1734/35. These cantatas were originally intended for performance on the major Feast Days of Christmastide: December 25, 1734 - January 6th, 1735. Thus, the overall structure is as follows:

The Birth (Christmas Day)
The Annunciation to the Shepherds (The Second Day of Christmas)
The Adoration of the Shepherds (The Third Day of Christmas)
The Circumcision and Naming of Jesus (New Years Day)
The Journey of the Magi (First Sunday of the New Year)
The Adoration of the Magi (Feast of the Epiphany)

Although scholars are not sure of the identity of the librettist, it is assumed that it may have been Bach's regular collaborator, Christian Friedrich Henrici, 1700-1764 (alias "Picander").

Like much of Bach's best work, most of the Christmas Oratorio material originated in other works, was retro-fitted with new texts, and improved upon. Three secular cantatas, BWV 213, 214, and 215, as well as a lost cantata, form its basis.

Another striking feature of the Oratorio is that each cantata has different instrumental forces. Three of the six parts use trumpets and timpani. Horns are used only in cantata IV. Most unusually, cantata II employs 4 oboists (2 oboes *d'amore*, sort of like an alto oboe, and 2 oboes *d'caccia*, a tenor oboe).

Of course, the instrumentation for each cantata quite obviously fits the degree of solemnity as well as the character of each cantata (the four oboes are clearly meant to evoke the pastoral nature of the Shepherds in the Christmas Story).

As mentioned earlier, since each cantata was intended for performance on six different days of Christmas, we can see why the instrumentation and characters are so varied, and, indeed, why mounting a performance of the Christmas Oratorio in one take is a vast undertaking. (Have you ever tried to book four baroque oboists for one concert?)

Each cantata can certainly stand on its own in a concert. However, hearing the entire Christmas story, with the various angles presented in the Gospels of St. Matthew, St. Luke and the more mystical and philosophical narrative of St. John, shows that, like his *Mass in B Minor*, there is an overall unity to the way the six separate works form a unified concept.

The other aspects of theological significance cannot be overstated. In true Lutheran spirit, the inclusion of the Passion Chorale (heard in the St. John and St. Matthew Passions) is no accident. To Bach's audience, the Chorale melody in *O Sacred Head Now Wounded* would have been a signal to recall Good Friday and the Cross. In his Christmas Oratorio, Bach clearly represents Lutheran theological statement that it is never far from the cradle of Christmas to the Cross of Good Friday.

Matt Glandorf