

# IBSACH



## CHRISTMAS ORATORIO

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*One Hundred Years Ago – A Centennial Christmas*

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# Johann Sebastian Bach *Christmas Oratorio*, 1734

## An Introduction



The town of Cöthen, engraved in 1650 by Matthäus Merian the elder (1593–1650), a well-known Swiss-German engraver and publisher.

### Kapellmeister in Cöthen, 1717–1723

**I**N December 1717 when Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) took up the role of Director of Music, or Kapellmeister, at the court of Leopold, Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen (1694–1728), he stepped into a strangely rarefied sphere of regal sophistication. Cöthen (modern spelling Köthen) was a small rural town of approximately 3,000 inhabitants, the administrative centre of a modest agricultural principality with a total population of about 10,000. This princely seat was disparagingly nicknamed Kuh-Cöthen or Cow-Cöthen.

The culture of civic and ecclesiastical music in Cöthen seems to have been rudimentary. The townsfolk were largely Calvinist. As such, instrumental music was banned from church services, while congregational singing would generally have been restricted to Psalm texts, set to simple melodies and sung in unison without accompaniment. Cöthen's Lutheran minority, which included Bach, was served by a single church furnished with an organ that had apparently fallen into a state of semi-neglect.

The musical life of Cöthen was entirely focused on the royal residence, the home of Prince Leopold, which stood in the centre of the town, separated from it by a moat and extensive ornamental gardens laid out in the geometric style. Twenty-three years old at the time of Bach's appointment, the young prince played the violin, 'sang a good bass' (as one eighteenth-century writer put it) and was proficient on both the harpsichord and the viola da gamba. In October 1710, seven years before Bach's arrival, Leopold had enjoyed a prolonged grand tour that took in the Low Countries, England, Germany, France and Italy, including three months in Rome. He returned to Cöthen in April 1713, travelling back via Florence, Venice, Vienna, Prague, Dresden and Leipzig. Leopold lost no opportunity to hear the very latest music. He was an enthusiastic opera goer, who also put together a collection of published scores. In addition, for seven months of his trip, including his time in Italy, the prince's musical guide and mentor was the German composer Johann David Heinichen (1683–1729), who spent six years plying his trade in Italy before becoming Kapellmeister in Dresden.

Clearly, Bach had every reason later to recall Prince Leopold as a man 'who both loved and understood music'. Upon his return to Cöthen the prince began to realise his ambition of setting up a musical establishment similar to those he had seen on his travels. Fortune smiled upon his enterprise (and pointedly demonstrated the precariousness of life in an autocratic household) when Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia (1688–1740, known as the 'Soldier King') came to power in Berlin in February 1713 and disbanded the celebrated court orchestra. Leopold immediately engaged half a dozen newly unemployed Berlin virtuosi and others soon followed. By 1716 Leopold's Cöthen Kapelle numbered about 18 first-class musicians, including three violinists, two flautists and two trumpeters as well as soloists on the bass viol, cello, oboe, bassoon, timpani and organ. The line-up was completed by a number of supplementary players who performed in *tutti* sections (known as *ripienists*) and occasionally also by visiting soloists.

As Christoph Wolff remarks, when Bach accepted the post in Cöthen he inherited a Kapelle 'whose professional core group comprised some of the finest musicians he could wish for'. Bach's task was to provide music for an employer who was himself 'a skilled musician with taste' and also a man who was intimately acquainted with the very latest trends in European music.



The Royal Palace of Anhalt Cöthen, engraved in 1650 by Matthäus Merian the elder.



Portrait of JS Bach by Johann Jakob Ihle, c. 1720.

Bach, it seems, found himself in a kind of musical hothouse, where the emphasis was emphatically upon instrumental music, with sacred music relegated to a position of minor importance. Works composed by Bach during his Cöthen period or performed there under his direction almost certainly include the 'Brandenburg' Concertos (BWV 1046–1051), the French Suites (BWV 812–817), much of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (BWV 846–893), the six Partitas and Sonatas for solo violin (BWV 1001–1006) and the six Cello Suites (BWV 1007–1012).

A busy rehearsal schedule reflects, at the very least, a weekly programme of concerts at Schloss Cöthen. Prince Leopold employed a full-time copyist (and sometimes an additional freelance), who was responsible for preparing parts for performance. Wolff notes that bookbinding costs in 1719–20 were sufficient 'to cover the cost of binding scores and parts for fifty ensemble and orchestral works, roughly one new work a week'. Vocal works were needed too, but in very much smaller numbers: sacred and secular cantatas were performed on 10 December to celebrate Leopold's birthday and on New Year's Day. Precise records are, unfortunately, lacking and many conjectured pieces are missing, but the current assumption is that between early 1718 and May 1723, while he was Kapellmeister at Cöthen, Bach probably wrote in excess of 350 works, of which around 200 have been lost.

Bach seems to have flourished in the musical microclimate created by Prince Leopold, so why did he decide to seek employment elsewhere? *Cherchez la femme!* On 11 December 1721 Leopold married his cousin Friederica Henrietta of Anhalt-Bernburg (1702–23). After five weeks of celebrations, including the performance of a lost nuptial cantata by Bach, the musical circumstances at Leopold's court gradually but perceptibly began to alter for the worse. Between 1721 and 1723 (when Bach left the prince's service) the music budget was reduced by between 10 and 15 percent and the number of salaried musicians fell to 14. Bach had no doubt whatsoever that this was due to the influence of Friederica Henrietta. As he explained in 1730 in a fascinating letter to Georg Erdman, his old 'schoolfriend and

travelling companion', the princess was what Bach termed an '*amusa*', a woman indifferent to the charms of the muses – to the arts generally and to music in particular:

You are well-acquainted with the course of my life from my youth up until the turn of events that took me to Cöthen as Kapellmeister. There I had a gracious Prince who both loved and understood music, and with whom I had expected to end my days. But it had to happen that the said *Serenissimus* married a Bernburg Princess, as a result of which his musical *inclinations* grew a little lukewarm, especially as the new Princess seemed to be an *amusa*.

Whether or not this really was the case (and Wolff's biography sheds light on the bigger picture), it was Bach's express perception. Perhaps the fate of the Berlin Kapelle, broken up by Friedrich Wilhelm, had raised Bach's awareness of how quickly the fortunes of those dependent on the whims of princes could turn. In any event, following the death of Kantor Johann Kuhnau in June 1722, a suitable post soon fell vacant at the Thomasschule in Leipzig. The inevitable complications were surmounted and in April 1723 the Leipzig Council agreed to offer the position to Bach, who accepted and signed a contract on 5 May. The sad irony was that in the meantime, on 4 April 1723, the inartistic Princess Friederica Henrietta also died, suffering from what was described as a weakness in her lungs. This changed circumstance made no difference, however. Bach's mind was made up, and on 22 May he and his family, with all their belongings, arrived in Leipzig in two carriages and four wagons to embark upon a new and very different kind of life.



Life-sized portrait of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen (1694–1728), painted in 1724, probably by Johann Christoph Müller. Oil on canvas, 242 × 173 cm, Köthen Historical Museum and Bach Memorial, Köthen, Germany. (Köthen is the modern spelling.)



Prospect of Leipzig, viewed from the south-east, showing the Thomasschule and Thomaskirche in the centre (nos. 12, 13) and the Nikolaikirche to the right (no. 20). Engraving published in 1749 by Joachim Ernst Scheffler.

## Kantor in Leipzig, 1723–1750

**M**OVING to Leipzig in May 1723, the Bach family was made up of Johann Sebastian, his second wife Anna Magdalena (1701–60, 16 years his junior), their baby daughter (who did not survive into adulthood) and four children from his first marriage (a further three had died in infancy). Bach had been married for the first time in 1707 to his cousin Maria Barbara, née Bach (1684–1720), who died suddenly in Cöthen in July 1720 while her husband was away from home with Prince Leopold. Bach's obituary (1754), co-authored by his and Maria Barbara's son Carl Philipp Emanuel, recalls the shock of Maria Barbara's untimely death:

After thirteen years of blissful married life with his first wife, the misfortune overtook him, in the year 1720, upon his return to Cöthen from a journey with his Prince to Carlsbad, of finding her dead and buried, although he had left her hale and hearty on his departure. The news that she had been ill and died reached him only when he entered his own house.

The following summer (1721) Bach was given permission to engage a young soprano for Leopold's Cöthen Kapelle. Anna Magdalena Wilcke was taken on as a chamber musician, at the top of the musical hierarchy, earning an excellent salary that exceeded those of her father and brother (both musicians). Later that year, in December 1721, 17 months after Maria Barbara's death, she and Bach were married. They were a devoted couple, who had 13 children, six of whom reached adulthood. In addition to running the rapidly expanding Bach household, Anna Magdalena continued to sing professionally (though no written records exist after 1725); she also worked as a copyist on many of Bach's best-known works and took keyboard lessons from her husband that resulted in the two books of practice pieces that Bach dedicated to her (1722 and 1725). In the same letter to Georg Erdmann quoted above, Bach gives a little insight into the musical life of their family in Leipzig in 1730:

The children of my second marriage are still young; the eldest is a boy, aged six. But they are all born musicians, and I can assure you that I can already form an ensemble both *vocaliter* and *instrumentaliter* within my family, especially since my present wife sings a pleasing soprano, while my eldest daughter joins in too and not at all badly.

By comparison with Cöthen, Leipzig was a big city, with a population of more than 30,000 (contrast London, however, which in 1715 had 630,000 inhabitants). After Dresden, Leipzig was Saxony's most important urban centre, a commercial hub that had been

hosting regular trade fairs since the twelfth century. It was the home of a venerable university, founded in 1409, which in Bach's time was one of the largest and most illustrious in Germany. The city was also pre-eminent in the book trade. All these factors combined to endow mid-eighteenth-century Leipzig with a very high degree of progressive intellectual and cultural prestige. With its thriving music scene, numerous distinguished art collections amassed by wealthy mercantile families, opulent new buildings and a flourishing coffee-house culture, Leipzig became known as 'Little Paris'.

The city had a number of important Lutheran churches that contributed significantly to its musical life. In 1717 Bach had been invited to Leipzig by the rector of the university to write a report on the new organ at the Paulinerkirche, which doubled as the university's principal lecture theatre. The two most important places of worship, however, were the Thomaskirche and the Nikolaikirche, and the former in particular could pride itself on its association with a long succession of famous musicians.

Bach was employed not by the Thomaskirche but by the adjoining school with which the church was associated. The most important part of his job was to prepare pupils from the Thomasschule to perform the music heard in church services at the Thomaskirche and the Nikolaikirche. Weekly performances alternated between



Thomaskirche and Thomasschule (left), Leipzig, engraved in 1723 by Johann Gottfried Krüger Snr.



A view of the Thomaskirche, Leipzig, where Bach was choir director from 1723 to 1750. Engraved in 1735 by Johann Georg Schreiber.

the two churches except on important feast days when the same music would be played at one church in the morning and the other in the afternoon. These duties entailed a demanding schedule of composition and rehearsal. In addition, Bach had a heavy teaching load. Before being confirmed as Thomaskantor he himself had to take an oral examination, carried out in Latin, to test his proficiency in theology. As Kantor, Bach was contractually obliged to teach 12 hours a week in the classroom, but a special arrangement allowed him to pay the classics tutor at the Thomasschule to take over his academic teaching, leaving him to concentrate entirely on the musical aspects of the curriculum. Although this relieved him of the need to teach Latin and theology, in order to prepare his students to meet the challenges of the extraordinary new music he was writing for them to perform, Bach spent considerably more time than he saved giving individual singing and instrumental lessons.

After 1723 when he moved to Leipzig, therefore, Bach's compositional focus was on the sacred music presented each Sunday and ecclesiastical feast day (except during Lent and Advent) in either or both of the city's two main churches. He supplied this need by writing a cantata for each separate occasion, based on the stipulated reading from Scripture amplified with explications, meditations and exhortations on the lesson of the day. Following the innovative format instituted by Erdmann Neumeister (1671–1756), Bach's Leipzig cantatas generally open with a chorus based on a biblical passage. This is typically followed by two pairs of recitatives and arias (not necessarily in that order and often including choral sections) that lead into a concluding hymn or chorale, sung by the choir who were possibly joined in this final act of musical worship by the whole congregation. Successive movements of the cantata for the day were performed at prescribed moments during the lengthy service to create a kind of Lutheran sermon in music. According to his obituary, Bach composed five cycles of cantatas in his early Leipzig years, each made up of about 60 works and each lasting half an hour. Approximately three-fifths of these have survived.

## The Christmas Oratorio, 1734

**B**ACH'S *Christmas Oratorio* takes the form of a continuous sequence of six cantatas, linked thematically, that narrate and reflect upon the Nativity story. Despite its fundamental unity, the piece was not intended to be heard at one sitting. Nor was it in any sense a concert piece. Rather, the six parts of the oratorio were written to be performed during the church services that took place on six separate days between Christmas Day and Epiphany. Part 1 (Christmas Day) deals with the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus; Part 2 (26 December) focuses on the appearance of the angels to the watching shepherds; Part 3 (27 December) shows the shepherds hastening to locate and worship the newborn child; Part 4 commemorates the Feast of the Circumcision (New Year's Day); Part 5, performed on the first Sunday after New Year, relates the journey of the Magi and their meeting with Herod in Jerusalem; finally, Part 6, for the Feast of Epiphany (6 January), tells of the arrival of the three wise men at Jesus' stable with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. On Christmas Day 1734 Part 1 was performed at the Nikolaikirche in the morning and repeated at the Thomaskirche that afternoon; the pieces for 26 December, New Year's Day and Epiphany (1 and 6 January 1735) were also presented in both churches, but in reverse order (mornings at the Thomaskirche, afternoons at the Nikolaikirche); Parts 3 and 5 were performed only at the Nikolaikirche.

Though the evidence is circumstantial, it seems highly likely that Bach's librettist for the *Christmas Oratorio* was Christian Friedrich Henrici (1700–64), who wrote under the pen name Picander. Working closely with Bach, Picander assembled the words for each part of the work, introducing his own poetry alongside pre-existing texts. Three different kinds of text are included in the oratorio: passages from the Bible, traditional chorales (Lutheran hymns) and free verse, including recitatives, arias and choruses.

A close look at the first cantata for Christmas Day exemplifies how the individual parts of the *Christmas Oratorio* are structured. 'Jauchzet, frohlocket' divides into two halves designed to lead the congregation from Advent into Christmas. It opens with a jubilant hymn, 'Rejoice, exult!' with words by Picander. Next comes a recitative, a setting of the opening of Luke, chapter 2, in Martin Luther's translation, which tells of the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. There follow a pair of movements, a recitative and aria with texts by Picander: the recitative, 'Now my beloved bridegroom', develops the image of the community of believers ('Zion') as the bride of Christ, the 'bridegroom'; the succeeding aria elaborates on the idea of the nuptial consummation, drawing on the impassioned language of the Song of Songs. The first half of 'Jauchzet, frohlocket' now comes to a close with a chorale, 'How shall I receive you', with a text by Paul Gebhardt dating from 1653.

The second half of this Christmas Day cantata follows exactly the same format: a Gospel text, again from Luke, chapter 2, is followed by a recitative (this time for choir and soloist) and an aria, both with words by Picander, that amplify the scriptural themes. Another chorale completes Part 1 of the *Christmas Oratorio*: 'Oh my beloved little Jesus', with an intimate and tender new text by Picander.

Particular constraints were placed upon the librettist of the *Christmas Oratorio* by the fact that in several of its movements Bach reused music that had been previously written for other occasions. The opening chorus, to give one prominent example among many, is taken from *Tönet, ihr Pauken!* (*Sound, you drums!* BWV 214), first performed in December 1733, a year before the première of the *Christmas Oratorio*, to celebrate the birthday of Maria Josepha, Electoress of Saxony and Queen of Poland (1699–1757). The syllabic stresses of 'TÖnet, ihr PAUken!' (STRONG, weak, weak, STRONG, weak) are repeated exactly in the phrasing of the opening chorus of the *Christmas Oratorio*: 'JAUCHzet, frohLOCKet'. The mood or 'affect' of the replacement text is also carefully suited to the musical context. New words were similarly provided for the music of four other movements from *Tönet, ihr Pauken!* that Bach used again in the oratorio.

Also in 1733 Bach wrote a congratulatory cantata for the eleventh birthday of Maria Josepha's son, Crown Prince Friedrich Christian of Saxony (1722–63). Familiarly known as 'Hercules at the Crossroads' (BWV 213), this work was first performed under Bach's direction on 5 September 1733 in the garden of Gottfried Zimmermann's Kaffeehaus in Leipzig by a student group, the Collegium Musicum. The following year six movements from 'Hercules at the Crossroads' were given new texts and recycled as part of the *Christmas Oratorio*.

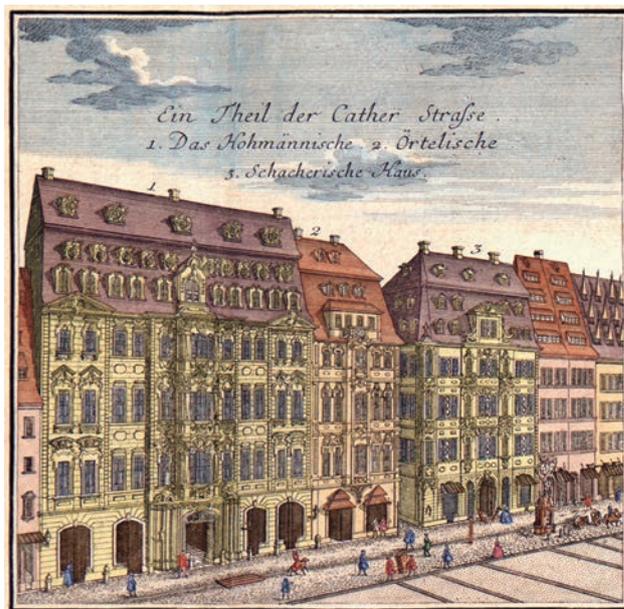
The text of 'Hercules at the Crossroads' was unquestionably written by Picander. It has therefore been suggested that, from the outset, Bach may have planned to reuse the music composed in 1733 for the two secular cantatas and that Picander may have worked on two sets of texts at the same time: congratulatory words for the royal birthdays; sacred ones for the *Christmas Oratorio*. The technical name for the recycling of music in this manner is 'parody', a word which in this context does not carry the usual pejorative connotations. (Elton John did a similar thing in a solemn setting in 1997 when he put new words to 'Candle in the Wind' to commemorate the death of Princess Diana.) Bach was working in an age when spontaneous inspiration had not yet

acquired the prestige later accorded to it by the Romantics. Transferring his music to a sacred context, Bach gave it a permanence that the ephemeral human occasion could not provide.

Putting these historical and technical considerations to one side, how is one to describe the tremendous power of Bach's achievement in the *Christmas Oratorio*? Each musical line has a beautiful integrity, a captivating melodic charm that makes it a pleasure both to perform and to hear. These individual components are controlled by an overall musical structure whose complexity is masked by a sense that what is being played, sung and heard is intuitively graspable. A dramatic and narrative context is provided by the Christmas story, elaborated on in meditative recitatives and prayer-like arias, and punctuated with forceful and moving simplicity by the chorales that are intended to unite the whole community in a concerted act of worship. An innumerable multiplicity of elements is harmonised in a whole that is at once intellectually, emotionally and spiritually fulfilling. Martin Luther anticipated the problem of accounting for such bewildering musical excellence when, in 1538, he was invited to address 'Students of Music' in a Preface to a collection of motets entitled *Symphoniae Iucundae*:

I should heartily wish that divine and most excellent gift of music to be praised and commended to all. But I am so much overwhelmed by the abundance and magnitude of its virtue and goodness that I cannot discover how to begin or end or limit my words, and am compelled, amidst such a multitude of things to praise, to be faint and inadequate in my praises. For who could cover everything? And if you wished to cover everything, you would seem to have covered nothing.

Paul Williamson © 2014



Joachim Ernst Scheffler's 1749 engraving of Katharinenstrasse in Leipzig shows Gottfried Zimmermann's Kaffeehaus (no. 2). From 1720 to 1741 Zimmermann's coffee-house was the meeting place for the Collegium Musicum, founded by the composer Georg Philipp Telemann in 1702 while he was studying law at the University of Leipzig. Bach directed the Collegium Musicum from 1729 to 1739. His secular 'Coffee Cantata' (BWV 211, 1732–5), essentially a mini-opera, was appropriately staged at Zimmermann's. Also performed there was 'Hercules at the Crossroads' (BWV 213), his congratulatory work for the eleventh birthday of Crown Prince Friedrich Christian of Saxony (1722–63).