



Johann Sebastian Bach: Christmas Oratorio

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RECORD REVIEW Three Christmas Oratorios

'Tis the season to jauchzen and frohlocken. Right on cue, here is a stimulatingly diverse crop of Christmas Oratorios: two on rather different scales employing period instruments (one on CD from Cambridge, one on DVD and Blu-ray from Brussels) and one employing twentieth-century hardware (nowadays sounding 'period' in its own right) from post-war Berlin. The Christmas Oratorio has not managed to attain quite the prominence in the repertoire that the Mass in B minor or the Passions have established for themselves – a little odd on the face of it, given that it has the narrative potential of the former and the sumptuous scoring of the latter. Even Bach himself gave it just a single outing, over Christmas-New Year 1733-34. Perhaps it is not too blasphemous to feel that Bach's parody practice might have had something to do with it: a great part of the music was originally intended for different words, and words that fit it somewhat better. The strangely gravelly tessitura of the chorus's opening utterance (taking the sopranos down to low A) is explained by the original text: not 'Jauchzet, frohlocket' ('Rejoice, exult!') but 'Tönet, ihr Pauken' 'Sound out, ye drums'. The lullaby to Baby Jesus from Part 2 ('Schlafe, mein Liebster') was originally sung by none other than a personification of Lust to tempt Hercules in a secular cantata. Hercules's aria of rejection (Ich will dich nicht hören') became the call to Zion to welcome Jesus as bridegroom ('Bereite dich Zion'); 'Großer Herr, o starker König' was originally addressed to a Königin. This is certainly all very inventive and economical (although surely bordering on the potentially scandalous at the time) but does not guarantee the ideal symbiosis between text and music – certainly the chorus which opens Part 5, one of the few large-scale choruses to be newly composed, does seem to have a particular freshness. [...]

Ristenpart's 1950 account would not be an obvious choice as one's only Christmas Oratorio. It is nonetheless an intriguing document of post-war Bach performance practice, incorporating several ideas one would generally associate with later decades. Even though it does run onto three CDs, the overall duration of 156 minutes is just four minutes longer than Layton's and ten more than Herreweghe's and some of his tempos are swifter than either.

Habakuk Traber's booklet note puts Ristenpart in historical context as helping to reclaim Bach from Nazi-era monumentality. The chorales show a quite modern understanding of Bach's fermatas (as phrase marks rather than held chords), making Layton's approach seem strangely old-fashioned by comparison. The shepherds' Sinfonia at the beginning of Part 2 is most attractively phrased and zips by in a mere 4'20" – Traber makes the comparison with René Jacobs's 1997 period-instrument

recording featuring the successors of the same choir, in which the same Sinfonia takes a leisurely 7'48" (Harmonia Mundi HMC2901630.31). On the debit side, the large-scale choruses are generally (inevitably?) somewhat slower to modern ears, with the runs choppily articulated; the 3/8 choruses, of which there are many, do not always manage to phrase in one to the bar, instead emerging with three relatively even accents.

The solo arias often show an enviable degree of chamber-music rapport between voices and instruments – something which eludes the vast majority of performances, historical or otherwise. (Indeed the combination so often met with today of rigorously historical instruments and not particularly historical voices is all but guaranteed to miss this rapport which Bach's scores above all seem to demand.) In 'Frohe Hirten' Helmut Krebs's tenor and the unnamed flautist trade their demisemiquavers as equals; in 'Ich will nur dir zu Ehren leben' Krebs is neatly embedded in the violin obbligatos. In 'Flößt, mein Heiland' soprano Agnes Giebel and her oboist are not only on compatible dynamic planes but share a compatible musical concept, which could not be said for the version on the Layton recording, as lovely as it is in other respects. The instrumental contribution is in general uneven: the high trumpets are overstretched in many passages compared with what their valveless colleagues manage so serenely on the other two recordings, the woodwinds generally fine, the strings a little inarticulate by today's standards, the harpsichord rather out of place in the general instrumental concept.

In all, though, Ristenpart's recording is an important testament to the complexity of interpretative currents in Bach performance in the second half of the twentieth century – not least in suggesting that some recent developments might not have led to more historically or musically appropriate results.

Not, then, the only recording to have on the shelf, but certainly one to be recommended for any listeners seriously interested in the recent history of performance practice. It is hard to avoid noticing that the vocal soloists on recent period-instrument recordings employ significantly more vibrato than some of their mid-twentieth century counterparts: not only Krebs for Ristenpart here but also, for example, Anton Dermota in Furtwängler's classic St Matthew Passion (EMI Références 5 65509-2) are comprehensively outdone in that department by Gilchrist and Hobbs, as well as Anthony Rolfe Johnson and Hans-Peter Blochwitz for Gardiner, Paul Agnew for Philip Pickett (Decca 458 838-2) and dozens of others. (Choirs, to be fair, have gone decisively in the opposite direction, and a good thing too – the RIAS choir's vibrato for Ristenpart is an unequivocal debit point.) Perhaps one day a recording might come along where the singers shape their notes as today's historical instrumentalists do in the service of a genuine chamber-music approach – I can only dimly imagine the possible results but I am sure they would be wonderful. I can't, alas, imagine how well-behaved I would have to be for Santa to organize that in the foreseeable future (Audite 21.421, three discs, 2 hours 36 minutes).