

## RECORDING NOTES

### Johann Sebastian Bach:

#### Cantatas BWV 62, 45, 192 & 140

The four cantatas assembled on this CD are among Bach's finest creations from the years 1723-1731, the period when he was concerned with providing a "well-regulated church music" for his employers in Leipzig. Two of them: BWV 62, *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*, from 1724; and BWV 140, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, from 1731, are closely associated with the Advent season and its message of promise in the coming of the Savior. BWV 45, *Es ist dir gesagt, Mensch, was gut ist*, for the 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity is an extended two-part cantata, which features (in the arioso for bass that begins Part 2, to be presented after the sermon) the words of Christ himself, exhorting the faithful to follow the Divine Law, while the text generally warns against "false prophets." BWV 192, *Nun danket alle Gott*, is a general hymn of praise (with the three verses of the original hymn for the middle of the 1600s presented unaltered and without any addition), perhaps composed for a wedding (the gigue-like finale, which reflects the atmosphere of a wedding feast, underlines this probability). Bach's cantata has been handed down in a secondary source in incomplete form and consists of three numbers directly based on the hymn of the same title. The tenor vocal part is also missing, and has been re-constructed by the editors of the Neue Bach-Ausgabe, the edition that has been used for this recording.

#### *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland, BWV 62*

(Cantata for the 1st Sunday in Advent)

This cantata, the second of two works based on Martin Luther's hymn (the other is BWV 61, composed ten years earlier), was from 1724 for the first Sunday in Advent. It is based entirely on Martin Luther's hymn of 1524, which is itself modeled on the Latin text, *Veni redemptor gentium*. Luther's original eight verses are distributed amongst the six sections found in Bach's cantata. The first and last appear literally in the first chorus and the final chorale, while verses 2 and 3 are freely adapted by Bach into the text of the first aria. Luther's verses 4 and 5 are combined into the following bass recitative, while verses 6 and 7 become the bass aria and following recitative for the two upper voices. Bach's opening chorale/chorus is a brilliant combination of Italianate concertante virtuosity and the Lutheran sobriety lent by the austere cantus firmus of the chorale melody, stated by the sopranos, and reinforced by the horn. The instruments are likewise distributed into opposing concertante groups: oboes against strings, while the lower choral voices frequently provide *Vorspinnung* imitation of the main choral melody in diminished note values. The unearthly effect of the whole is underlined by the statement of the chorale melody in the bass instruments in octaves at the end of the opening and subsequent *ritornelli*. This highly impressive movement is succeeded by a joyful (and difficult) aria in G major for tenor accompanied by strings, which exhorts the people to wonder at the "great mystery" of the unblemished (chaste) appearance of the Ruler of the world.

The bass then sings a *secco* recitative (using as its text Luther's verses 4 and 5) introducing the Hero of Judah as He who will redeem us "fallen ones". The following

highly original *da capo* aria, with its unison string accompaniment (upper strings doubling the continuo in octaves) – a rare device for Bach, emphasizing strength, unity and underlining its “heroic” character, asks the Savior to fight for us and reinforce our inner strength. Gratitude is then expressed by the soprano and alto together in an accompanied recitative that recalls the warm and sunny character of the first aria, before Luther’s final verse is rendered by Bach with a concise, straightforward four-part setting of the original chorale melody.

***Es ist dir gesagt, Mensch, was gut ist, BWV 45***

*(Cantata for the 8th Sunday after Trinity)*

The 8th Sunday after Trinity deals (in the Epistle, Romans 8.12-17) with the concept that those driven by the Spirit of God are God’s children, while the Gospel reading (Matthew 7.15-23) warns against the teachings of false prophets. First performed on 11 August, 1726, the (unknown) author of the text of the opening chorus relates the words of the Gospel for the day (“By their fruits you shall know them”), with the words of the Old Testament prophet, Micah (6.8), that God makes his will known and expects man to carry it out. Furthermore, the text comfortingly assures us that God will assist us in our attempts to fulfill the will of the Almighty. The expansive opening chorus, freely composed, rather than based on a chorale, is scored for a rich complement of instruments: strings, flutes and oboes, and set in the bright and cheerful key of E major. The bulk of the movement is given over to an extended fugue, developed out of the main theme announced in the extended instrumental introduction (almost a *sinfonia* in its own right).

The central axis of the work is the *arioso* that opens the second part, in which the voice of Jesus (or, properly, the *vox Christi*) addresses us directly, warning of the appeal of false prophets. The aria that immediately precedes it, set for tenor and written in the powerful and serious key of C sharp minor, refers to God’s strict accounting of our obedience to His word. The *arioso* itself, a through-composed virtuoso piece for bass in A major, with equally brilliant (and thematically related) string accompaniment, almost belies the underlying seriousness of the text, warning of the false prophets. After the voice of Jesus is heard, without interruption we are taken into the intimate world of baroque chamber music, where the alto provides a private, consoling reflection on the words of Christ: “God will acknowledge whosoever acknowledges Him.” The aria features an obbligato part for the *flauto traverso*, in the related (to that of the previous *arioso*) key of F sharp minor, with walking continuo bass.

“Heart and mouth will thus be my judge; God will reward me according to my state of mind.” With this *secco* recitative, for alto and continuo, we are introduced to the final chorale, which uses the second verse of *O Gott, du frommer Gott*, by Johann Heermann (1630): “Grant that I am diligent, timely and successful in carrying out Your works.” This provides a consoling conclusion, emphasized by the bright and happy key of E major with which the cantata began.

## ***Nun danket alle Gott, BWV 192***

*(Cantata for unspecified occasion, before 1729)*

Through examination of the copyist's handwriting, Alfred Dürr has established that this cantata, though its purpose cannot be precisely established, nevertheless belongs to the same time period as BWV 51, *Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen*, dating its first performance to sometime just before 1729. The original score and the vocal tenor part are missing, although its present form (just three movements, without connecting recitatives) seems to reflect the work's original state. The text of the hymn *Nun danket alle Gott*, based on Ecclesiasticus 50.22-3 ("Now bless the God of all, who in every way does great things; who exalts our days from birth, and deals with us according to His mercy. May He give us gladness of heart, and grant that peace may be in our days in Israel, as in olden days."), was composed by Martin Rinckart (1586-1649) against a backdrop of plague and the horrors of the Thirty Years War. In 1637, Rinckart, having settled in his home village of Eilenburg as pastor, had to contend with the occupation of Swedish troops in the town, who demanded a ransom of 30,000 thalers; as well as a plague that killed 8,000 of the inhabitants. Rinckart himself buried up to half of them in mass funerals, while successfully appealing to the Swedes to reduce their required "tribute" to 2,000 thalers. The precise date of the hymn's composition is uncertain, but it was sung all over Germany by 1648 at the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War.

Bach's text consists of the three verses of Rinckart's hymn, written as early as 1636, though perhaps later. The tune associated with the hymn, also taken over by Bach is either by Johann Crüger (1508-1662), or as another tradition suggests, by Martin Rinckart himself, composed in 1648 in celebration as he learned of the welcome end to thirty years of military conflict in Germany. Despite its brevity, Bach's splendid cantata requires a quite sizeable complement of performers (flutes, oboes and strings as well as four-part chorus). The opening concertante movement conforms to one of Bach's favorite models, where the chorale is presented strophe by strophe in the soprano part, with considerable use of the technique known as *Vorspinnung* (or contrapuntal references to the tune in diminished note values occurring before the statements of the chorale proper) in the other voices. The only addition to this structure occurs in the very last phrase where the chorus exclaims, as one: "Now thank we all our God."

The second movement, a suave and beautiful duet for soprano and bass (the first of three that occur throughout two of the cantatas on this CD), has a dance-like character, underlined by the clearly articulated phrase structure and the more or less integral "binary" harmonic progress, despite the fact that the movement lacks the internal half-way bar-line of a dance movement proper. The harmonic mid-point (tonic to dominant) coincides with the division between the *Stollen* (first section, often repeated) and *Abgesang* (or conclusion) of the chorale. The instrumentation further lends the piece a pastoral air: with strings doubled by one each of the oboes and flutes, while the text asks God to grant us a joyful heart, noble peace and freedom from strife. The finale is a boisterous gigue (a dance traditionally associated with wedding feasts). The lines of the chorale are again presented in long note-values by the sopranos, this time accompanied by free polyphony in the lower parts, while the vocal segments are separated from one another by extended instrumental interludes. A surprise, as also occurs precisely in the

analogous section of the opening movement, is the “deceptive” modulation to the subdominant of C major towards the end (after the final line of the chorale is delivered), soon returned to the home key by way of an inverted dominant seventh chord.

### ***Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 140***

*(Cantata for the 27th Sunday after Trinity, 1731)*

By late in the 16th century Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608), ordained into the Lutheran Church in 1576 after completing his education at the universities of Erfurt and Wittenburg, had become the pastor of the town of Unna in Westphalia. During 1597, in an eerie foretaste of the events of forty years later with pastor Martin Rinckart, composer of *Nun danket alle Gott*, the town was stricken with a devastating plague that carried off 1,300 of its inhabitants, with Nicolai himself on many occasions burying up to 30 of his parishioners in a single day. In grief and despair he consoled himself by immersing himself in St. Augustine’s *City of God*, and then wrote a book of meditations based on it, which he called *A Mirror of Joy*:

There seemed to be nothing so sweet, agreeable and delightful than the contemplation of the noble and sublime doctrine of eternal life... I called my manuscript *Mirror of Joy*, and created it either to leave behind as the token of my own, joyful Christian death, or, (if God should spare me) to comfort other sufferers whom He should also visit with the plague.

*A Mirror of Joy* contained the two hymns that have become the most celebrated and universally loved in all of Germany, *Wie schön leuchtet (uns) der Morgenstern* (How beautifully shines the morning star) and *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* (Awake, a voice cries out to us!). *Wachet auf* was originally titled: “Of the Midnight Voice and the Wise Virgins who meet their Heavenly Bridegroom.” Bach’s timelessly great cantata, based on Nicolai’s hymn (for which the pastor of Unna provided both words and melody) was composed for the 27th Sunday after Trinity, an occasion that appears in the church calendar only rarely, when Easter falls especially early, between 22 and 26 March. It occurred on only five occasions during Bach’s lifetime: in 1690, 1693, 1704, 1731 and 1742. BWV 140 was written to be performed on 25 November, 1731, and was repeated by Bach, when the 27th Sunday after Trinity recurred in 1742. The Gospel for this particular Sunday (Matthew 25.1-13) is the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. Nicolai’s hymn consists of three verses, which serve as the outer and central pillars of Bach’s cantata as nos. 1, 4 & 7. These movements are interspersed with two recitatives and a pair of love duets between the Soul of the Faithful Christian (soprano) and Christ, the Bridegroom (bass). The non-chorale based movements are all based on freely composed verse, basically derived from the Gospel for the day, the *Song of Songs*, and with quotations from Isaiah, Genesis and Hosea appearing as well, all of which expand on the basic imagery of joining the Soul as bride to Christ as bridegroom. The opening extended chorale/chorus is one of Bach’s most inspired mature movements. The sopranos, doubled by a horn, introduce the strophes of Nicolai’s hymn, with elaborate *Vorimitation* (anticipatory imitation) throughout the lower vocal parts. The key (E flat major) and the disposition of two opposing groups of instruments (three oboes: oboes I &

II plus tenor oboe or taille, versus strings) creates an unusually warm and expansive atmosphere. The *alleluia* strophe of the chorale is anticipated by a newly introduced fugue subject (also on *alleluia*) occurring in the lower three parts. Bach juxtaposes both French (dotted) rhythms, symbolizing the “royal” nature of the Bridegroom, with virtuosic and flowing Italianate figuration. The resulting dialogue between instrumental groups clearly foreshadows what is to follow later on in the duets between the Soul and Jesus.

The cantata designates the three solo singers as clearly defined characters: the tenor as narrator, the soprano as the Soul and the bass as Jesus. The two duets offer considerable contrast in key, instrumentation and general *affekt*. The first, in C minor features a *violino piccolo* as the solo instrument, playing a brilliant and difficult coloratura part of its own, as a backdrop to the “sighing” motifs of the singers. The *violino piccolo* is a small violin, tuned a minor third higher than usual, whose silvery brilliance perhaps symbolizes the radiance of the Bride in anticipation of her marriage to the Savior. The second duet is preceded by an expressive accompanied recitative where the Bridegroom accepts the Soul as spouse, while the following B flat major *da capo* duet is a joyous celebration of their union by the pair, featuring a florid obbligato oboe solo with continuo accompaniment of bassoon and organ.

Along with the opening chorus, the other pillars on which this cantata is based, the central (no. 4) and final (no. 7) chorales are both settings of the *Wachet auf* hymn: no. 4 as a trio sonata movement, with upper strings in unison and tenor (singing the choral tune) above an independent bass. Bach later transcribed this movement for organ solo as the first of his six Schübler Chorales (BWV 645). The final chorale, notated by Bach in archaic minim note values, is a plain four-part cantional setting for voices of verse three of Nicolai’s hymn. The voices are doubled by all instruments, with an added brilliance being provided by the *violino piccolo* playing one octave above the vocal soprano line. BWV 140 is a relatively late cantata, written at the end of the period of Bach’s self-imposed task of composing a five-year set of works for every Sunday of the church year. It provides a summing up of Bach’s inexhaustible genius and represents the supreme pinnacle of his achievement in this field. It is interesting to speculate on whether the good *Burghers* of Leipzig really understood what was offered to them by their Cantor, who (after Georg Philipp Telemann and Christoph Graupner), had been their third choice to fill the position of *Director musices* for the city’s four churches. In any case, Bach appears to have grown weary of his employment, for his creative flow of cantatas, which at its height culminated in one major work being composed each week, showed signs of abating by the mid 1730s, after which he composed but few new cantatas.

—Peter Watchorn