

Bradley Lehman and Andrew White

Bach cantatas

In his preface to the first edition of *The cantatas of J. S. Bach* (1971), Alfred Dürr bemoaned the ‘Cinderella status’ of the cantatas (or, more properly, ‘concertos for voices and instruments’), which many regard as the heart of Bach’s oeuvre. Only a handful of them were then familiar to most people. Since that time, in the intervening four decades, there has been an explosion of interest in this neglected music, borne out by numerous recording projects. Several complete cycles have been completed: the pioneering project (using historically plausible instruments and style) by Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt, and another cycle on modern instruments by Helmut Rilling. More recently, two additional cycles have been completed on period instruments: Pieter-Jan Leusink’s (Brilliant Classics) and Ton Koopman’s (Challenge Classics). There are also several cycles nearing completion: Masaaki Suzuki’s BIS cycle has notched up some 45 discs, and John Eliot Gardiner is only about seven volumes away from completing the release of his cycle, recorded live during the anniversary year in 2000.

Besides these complete cantata cycles, there have been some series on a smaller scale. Christophe Coin’s three discs (*Astree Auvidis*), presenting cantatas with movements scored for the violoncello piccolo—some of Bach’s most poignant inspirations, fill a niche in the catalogue. Philippe Herreweghe, whose Collegium Vocale Gent participated in some of the later recordings in the Leonhardt/Harnoncourt cycle, began recording selected clusters of cantatas with Virgin in the late 1980s. Herreweghe has

continued recording Bach cantatas with Harmonia Mundi, and this year marks his 16th cantata release with them. Karl-Friedrich Beringer and the 70-voice Windsbach Boys' Choir have made some especially fine Bach cantata recordings (Rondeau) with modern-instrument ensembles, and older recordings by Karl Richter, Hans-Joachim Rotzsch, Fritz Werner, *et al.* are available again on CD.

More recently, there have been numerous projects employing the one-voice-per-part approach. Probably the most ambitious is a (projected) complete cycle by Eric Milnes and Montréal Baroque (ATMA). Sigiswald Kuijken has undertaken a compelling concert/recording series (Accent), committing to disc one cantata per liturgical Sunday or feast day, and presenting new ideas about the cello. There are fine series by the Purcell Quartet (Chandos), and Philippe Pierlot with the Ricercar Consort (Mirare), focusing primarily on Bach's pre-Leipzig work. Also worth mention are Jeffrey Thomas's older recordings with the American Bach Soloists (Koch), now in reissue. May we hope for additional recordings by the most prominent one-per-part researchers, Joshua Rifkin and Andrew Parrott?

With all of this interest around Bach's cantatas (and the projects cited here are only representative), we live in a golden age of cantata recordings. And despite the current state of the music industry and the world economy, this momentum seems likely to continue, exemplified by the interesting variety of new recordings under review here.

Bass Gotthold Schwarz is no stranger to the cantatas of Bach. He participated in Gardiner's cantata pilgrimage, and his collaborations with Christophe Coin are consistently fine. Schwarz's singing in this recording, **Bach: Cantatas 82, 158, 56** (Capriccio 67 190, *rec* 2004/6, 50'), is solid. However, these performances do not stand out from the work of his excellent competitors in this repertory: such as Max van Egmond (Bruggen), Peter Kooy (with Herreweghe and, more recently, Suzuki), Klaus Mertens (Kuijken), David Thomas (Parrott) and Thomas Quasthoff (Kusmaul). A case in point: *BWV*82, 'Ich habe Genu[n]g', is one of Bach's most popular cantatas. There is some fine playing by La Stagione Frankfurt and oboist Luise Baumgartl. However, the overall approach to this cantata is rather subdued, particularly in no.4 (recitative, 'Mein Gott ...') and no.5, an aria of joyful abandon and rapturous embrace of the Christian afterlife. *BWV*56 is well known for its 'crossing' head-motif in no.1 and the sea-waves (simulated by the cello) in no.2, but Schwarz's reading is decidedly undramatic. Once again there is fine oboe work in no.3, but the singing does not capture the emotional uplift of the soaring eagle in the text.

Bach's four surviving cantatas for the 16th Sunday after Trinity are exceptional—even by Bachian standards—for their emotional intensity and expression. Philippe Herreweghe's recording, **Bach: Cantatas 27, 81, 95, 161** (Harmonia Mundi HMC 901969, *rec* 2006/7, 63'), features three of the four Trinity 16 cantatas, plus no.81. Herreweghe is known for his refined performances of Bach's difficult polyphony: carefully manicured, spiritually calm and tending to take few risks. These characteristics are evident in his approach to *BWV*27, 'Wer weiss, wie nahe mir mein Ende?' The opening movement is one of Bach's most sublime meditations on human mortality. Herreweghe's choral sound glows, but fails to capture the magic of Gardiner's performance, which is remarkable for its expressive gestures and its dramatic interchange between soloists and a larger choir. Herreweghe, with his brisker tempos, glosses over the literary subtleties of the chorale text, particularly the jarring statements about the transience of human life and the abruptness of death.

Still, Herreweghe's recording has a fine alto soloist in Matthew White, whose performance of no.3 is among the best. Comparison of Herreweghe's approach in this aria with five other recordings (Jürgens 1967, Harnoncourt 1973, Leonhardt 1995, Leusink 1999 and Gardiner 2000) shows a remarkable range of tempos: Leonhardt (playing organ for Jürgens, and later conducting) is slowest, and Herreweghe and Gardiner are the fastest. Gardiner opts for Bach's alternate instrumentation of harpsichord instead of obbligato organ.

Herreweghe's work with the other two Trinity 16 cantatas—*BWV*95 and 161—also compares unfavourably to Gardiner's. In the opening chorus of *BWV*95, Herreweghe is more subdued than Gardiner, whose faster tempo enables him to portray the halt at 'sterben' with greater dramatic contrast, drawing more attention to the Pauline paradox: 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain'. No.4 is, perhaps, the highlight of the cantata, with its pizzicato strings imitating bell strokes. Herreweghe's ensemble produces a lovely sound, but Hans Jörg Mammel is not as expressive as Padmore (Gardiner).

Herreweghe's team fares best in the intimate *BWV*161, from Bach's Weimar years. Although his approach to no.1 could be more deliberate, it is finely sung by White. No.3, 'Mein Verlangen,' is surely one of Bach's most poignant arias for the tenor, and Mammel sings effectively. The strongest point of Herreweghe's reading of *BWV*161—and arguably the whole disc—is no.5. This has rapt singing from the Collegium Vocale Gent that, coupled with the lovely playing of the flute obbligato, ideally expresses the 'sweet heavenly joy' of the text. Herreweghe's 161 is an

interesting counterpart to two excellent one-per-part performances: the Purcell Quartet (Chandos), and Daniel Taylor and colleagues (ATMA).

Bach: Cantatas 57, 32, 49 (Cypres CYP1652, *rec* 2007, 68') presents three dialogue cantatas, two of which are unjustly neglected—BWV57 (composed for 26 December, St Stephen's Day) and BWV32 (composed for the First Sunday after Epiphany). BWV49 is the best known of these three. The performance here complements other excellent recordings by Kuijken, Coin and Leusink. Stephan MacLeod has established himself as a fine Bachian bass, having worked with Suzuki's Bach Collegium Japan and more recently with Pierlot, Leonhardt and Milnes. In BWV57, he sings his arias with fine characterization. Salome Haller's soprano is solid and pleasant, but with a generalized expression that does not always seem particularly Baroque in style. A fine alternative is Herreweghe's excellent 1996 recording of BWV57, with Peter Kooy and Vasiljka Jezovšek (Harmonia Mundi).

According to the booklet, the inspiration for this Cypres recording by Les Folies Françaises under Patrick Cohën-Akenine was the organ at Pontaurum, in the Auvergne. It is a copy of the 1703 organ by J. F. Wender that Bach played in Arnstadt. It is unfortunate, then, that the booklet does not also include the instrument's specification (from other sources: two manuals and pedal, 22 registers, slightly unequal temperament after Neidhardt, $a' = 465\text{Hz}$). The instrument as played by Francois Saint-Yves sounds terrific here, especially in its concertante role in BWV49 (playing music that Bach also used in the E major harpsichord concerto). This CD as a whole also demonstrates a texture that is still rare in Bach cantata recordings: organ and harpsichord playing basso continuo simultaneously, playing from parts in Bach's original keys (notated a whole tone apart). The recording-session photos in the booklet show the vocal soloists and orchestra in standing positions in the nave, with organ and ripieno choir (for the closing chorales of BWV57 and 32) in the balcony.

Though **Bach: Cantatas vol.17** (SDG 150, *rec* 2000, 96') comes towards the end of Gardiner's series (the volume numbering begins with the Trinity 1 set), this, technically, is the first recording from Gardiner's historic cantata pilgrimage. As with previous SDG releases, this set is notable for its energy and sense of occasion. Other recordings of the cantatas contained in the Gardiner set may be more refined, but there is a panache in these live recordings that complements the more steady, studied-in-the-studio approach of, say, Masaaki Suzuki and Bach Collegium Japan.

One of the highlights of these two discs is the solo work of tenor James Gilchrist. He shines in BWV143 (a cantata

of dubious authenticity), particularly in no.4, 'Tausendfaches Unglück' and in the tenor chorale (no.6). He is also excellent in the exquisite violoncello piccolo aria of BWV41, competing with the fine readings by Markus Schäfer (Sony) and Christoph Pregardien (Astree). Gilchrist successfully navigates the considerable demands of no.2 in BWV171 (with its dense, four-part counterpoint), but in no.6 of BWV153 (a rage aria) the tempo seems too brisk, making it difficult for him to enunciate the text. These discs also contain fine performances by soprano Ruth Holton and bass Peter Harvey, particularly in the lovely aria (with soprano chorale) of BWV58.

True to their reputation, the Monteverdi Choir is also in good form in these New Year works. In the spectacular opening chorus of BWV41, they negotiate the long (14-line!) chorale text with enthusiasm and sensitivity. Koopman's and Suzuki's readings may be more polished, but this reading is remarkable for its sustained sense of drama. The Monteverdi Choir is also excellent in BWV16, with particularly fine contributions from the basses in no.1 and no.3. This cantata seems perfectly suited to Gardiner's strengths in Bach, as is the opening movement of BWV151, which also showcases the prowess of the Monteverdi Choir. A more modest approach to Bach's choral movements may be in fashion (and more economic), but even the most avid supporters of one-per-part should not ignore the excellence of this well-drilled choir.

The cantata BWV30a was a celebratory piece in honour of Johann Christian von Henicke, an official of the local government in 1737. Bach recast it as a sacred cantata (BWV30), for the Feast of St John the Baptist (24 June), soon after that. The first and last movements are grand choruses with the same music but different words; in **Bach: Cantatas 30a, 207** (Alpha 118, *rec* 2007, 73') Gustav Leonhardt's performance, with Les Chantres du Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles and Café Zimmermann, the last movement unfortunately loses some energy (compare, for instance, with Gardiner's and Milnes's energetic renditions of these choruses in BWV30), but all the rest of the performance is well focused and brilliant. A highlight is the alto aria (no.5), about delight of the soul, with flute and muted violin over pizzicato accompaniment and fine singing by Robin Blaze.

There are not many competing recordings of BWV207, an allegorical cantata for the installation of Gottlieb Kortte as a Professor of Jurisprudence in 1726. The composition reuses several movements from the first Brandenburg Concerto, but transposed to D, and rescored with trumpets, flutes and voices instead of the horns. The music is spectacular, especially when the trumpets interrupt the end of the fifth movement's Duetto. Compared with Goebel

(Archiv and Teldec: powerful, but sometimes too fast for his singers) and Schreier (Brilliant Classics, sounding dated in performance style), Leonhardt's reading is generally brisk-sounding, although it sometimes seems a bit too 'safe' with missed opportunities to make a stronger effect. The singers, including Monika Frimmer, Markus Schäfer and Stephan MacLeod, and orchestra are all first rate.

The 56-page booklet (so thick that it immediately rips through its slot in the digipak) includes a fine musicological essay by Gilles Cantagrel, but it also spends six pages in an over-the-top presentation (by an art historian) of the eroticism in the reproduced Boucher painting. The lively articulation throughout this disc is reminiscent of Otto Klemperer's approach to Bach's music, where energetic individual notes take the place of more overt dramatic shaping; it can be very satisfying. It also recalls Leonhardt's own recently reissued disc of BWV 27, 34 and 41 (with the Tölzer Knabenchor), part of the budget-priced 'Gustav Leonhardt Jubilee Edition' (Sony) celebrating his long and brilliant career.

The recording of **Bach: Cantatas** (Channel Classics CCS SA 23807, rec 2005, 78') by Florilegium and soprano Johannette Zomer is among our favourite discs in this review. The sound is outstanding, and the performances are elegant and moderate. The B minor suite BWV 1067 (with all repeats) is one of the most lively and lucid recordings of this remarkable piece, played here by only seven musicians, directed by soloist Ashley Solomon. The Overture is played at a flowing tempo (and without overdotting) in the opening and closing sections, and the dances have subtle inequalities in the delivery, gently emphasizing the French character.

The sinfonia of BWV 146 is the organ version of the D minor harpsichord concerto, BWV 1052. It makes a lively seven-minute 'filler' at the beginning of the disc, not really matching the character of 'Ich habe genug' which follows it, but still welcome. Zomer's performance of BWV 82a is smooth and comforting. It competes with nearly a dozen other recordings by sopranos and mezzo-sopranos (including Emma Kirkby, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson and Karina Gauvin), Ian Bostridge an octave lower, and of course a longer list of basses and baritones singing the original version. Here in E minor, with flute obbligato, it makes a surprisingly good pairing on disc with the B minor suite. Zomer again faces tough competition with Kirkby, Lieberson, Magdalena Kozena, Nancy Argenta, *et al.* in BWV 199, while Natalie Dessay's new recording (Virgin) does not seem to capture the spirituality of this piece. This cantata requires a wide dramatic range, fulfilled most powerfully by Lieberson in 2002 (with the subtext of her own suffering near the end of her life). Johannette Zomer brings out the

emotions and text clearly without ever overdoing it; the performance wears very well on repeated listening.

Websites

Alpha www.alpha-prod.com

Capriccio www.capriccio.at

Cypres www.cypres-records.com

Channel Classics www.channelclassics.com

Harmonia Mundi www.harmoniamundi.com

SDG www.solideogloria.co.uk

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