Northern Iowa Bach Cantata Series

Featuring
Cantorei and members of the Northern Iowa Symphony Orchestra
4 March 2022
12:15pm
McElroy Lobby of the Gallagher Bluedorn Performing Arts Center

Christ Lag in Todesbanden, BWV 4, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

I. Sinfonia
II. versus 1 [chorus] Christ lag in Todesbanden
III. versus 2 [soprano/alto duet] Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt
IV. versus 3 [tenor aria] Jesus Christus, Gottes Sohn
V. versus 4 [choral] Es war ein wunderlicher Krieg
VI. versus 5 [bass aria] Hier ist das rechte Osterlamm
VII. versus 6 [soprano/tenor duet] So feiern wir das hohe Fest
VIII. versus 7 [chorale] Wir essen und leben wohl

Notes on the Program

The style of this famous cantata clearly places it in the early part of Bach’s career; it was probably composed for Easter celebration in Mühlhausen in either 1707 or 1708, when Bach was in his early twenties. During Bach’s early years as cantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, he presented the church with nearly five complete cycles of music for the weekly Sunday worship service, and this cantata, based on Martin Luther’s Easter hymn “Christ lag in Todesbanden,” was recopied and revived for this Leipzig repertory. Despite what would have been a decidedly old-fashioned style by the time of Bach’s arrival in Leipzig, the composer seems to have surmised that it would make the same powerful impression at the time as it still does in ours.

Christ lag in Todesbanden shows no signs of the simplifying reforms and stylistic internationalization (as advanced by Erdmann Neumeister) so prevalent in the genre of Lutheran church music around the beginning of the eighteenth century. Nor is there evidence of Italianate operatic recitatives and arias. Rather, the successive movements solidly expound the successive strophes of Luther’s chorale.

Luther’s 1524 melody (with echoes of the Gregorian hymn “Pange lingua gloriosi”) permeates the musical substance of each movement. In the Lutheran service, the cantata would have been performed immediately following the Gospel text, understood as an element of the worship immediately pertinent to its theological content, and perhaps even commenting upon it like the sermon that followed.

After an opening sinfonia (which contains strong motivic echoes of the chorale), Bach sets the first verse of the text in the form of an extended chorale prelude, with passages of imitation crowned by the chorale melody sung as a cantus firmus in the highest voice. Though this
austere, even archaic, structure produces a somber tone, the movement closes (as does each verse) with an exuberant Alleluia. The second verse, which describes the ancient power of death, adopts an appropriately forceful tone derived from octave leaps in the melody. The third chorale verse, sung as a cantus firmus by a tenor solo, has an accompaniment for obbligato violin.

The structure of the cantata is based on a chiastic layout, Chorale – Duet – Solo – Chorale – Solo – Duet – Chorale, and the central fourth movement becomes the focal point of the whole work. This vibrant contrapuntal movement depicts the “wonderous battle” between life and death, which Luther’s text asserts was won by Christ’s death. There follows a bass aria replete with rhetorical gestures, such as a famous melodic leap down a diminished twelfth when the vanquishing of Death occurs. Verse six invites all present in the worship service to celebrate the holy festival of this victory; the phrases of this duet dance above a festive dotted-rhythm in the accompaniment. The final verse is set homophonically, in hymn style, appropriate for congregational participation.

-Timothy Dickey

**Texts and Translations**

**versus 1 [chorus] Christ lag in Todesbanden Christ lag in Todesbanden**

Für unsre Sünd gegeben,  
Er ist wieder erstanden  
Und hat uns bracht das Leben;  
Des wir sollen fröhlich sein,  
Gott loben und ihm dankbar sein  
Und singen halleluja,  
Halleluja!

Christ lay in death's bonds  
handed over for our sins,  
he is risen again  
and has brought us life  
For this we should be joyful,  
praise God and be thankful to him  
and sing alleluia,  
Alleluia!

**Versus 2 [soprano/alto duet] Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt**

Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt  
Bei allen Menschenkindern,  
Das macht' alles unsre Sünd,  
Kein Unschuld war zu finden.  
Davon kam der Tod so bald  
Und nahm über uns Gewalt,  
Hielt uns in seinem Reich gefangen.  
Halleluja!

Nobody could overcome death  
among all the children of mankind.  
Our sin was the cause of all this,  
no innocence was to be found.  
Therefore death came so quickly  
and seized power over us,  
held us captive in his kingdom.  
Alleluia!
**Versus 3 [tenor aria] Jesus Christ, God's son**

Jesus Christ, God's son,
has come in our place
and has put aside our sins,
and in this way from death has taken
all his rights and his power,
here remains nothing but death's outward form
it has lost its sting.
Alleluia!

**Versus 4 [chorus] Es war ein wunderlicher Krieg**

It was a strange battle
where death and life struggled.
Life won the victory,
it has swallowed up death
Scripture has proclaimed
how one death ate the other,
death has become a mockery.
Alleluia!

**Versus 5 [bass aria] Hier ist das rechte Osterlamm**

Here is the true Easter lamb
that God has offered
which high on the trunk of the cross
is roasted in burning love,
whose blood marks our doors,
which faith holds in front of death,
the strangler can harm us no more
Alleluia!

**Versus 6 [soprano/tenor duet] So feiern wir das hohe Fest**

Thus we celebrate the high feast
with joy in our hearts and delight
that the Lord lets shine for us,
He is himself the sun
who through the brilliance of his grace
Erleuchtet unsre Herzen ganz,
Der Sünden Nacht ist verschwunden.
Halleluja!

enlightens our hearts completely,
the night of sin has disappeared.
Alleluia!

Versus 7 [chorale] Wir essen und leben wohl
Wir essen und leben wohl
We eat and live well
on the right Easter cakes,
the old sour-dough should not
be with the word grace,
Christ will be our food
and alone feed the soul,
faith will live in no other way.
Alleluia!