

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The original contexts for Johann Sebastian Bach's *Magnificat* BWV 243 and George Frideric Handel's *A Song for St Cecilia's Day* HWV 76 could hardly have been more different. Bach composed his work in 1723 (though a 1733 revised version is almost universally performed today) as part of a project to equip himself with a repertory for his new post as Cantor of the St. Thomas School and City Music Director in Leipzig. The *Magnificat* is liturgical music, presenting the so-called Cantic of Mary from Luke's gospel, a text central to the Sunday afternoon vesper service in the principal churches.

Some 15 times a year, on high feasts and Marian celebrations, Bach needed a particularly festive *Magnificat* setting in Latin; on other occasions the text was presented in German to an adapted chant tune, sung verse by verse like a hymn. BWV 243 was thus heard in church on solemn religious occasions. Its listeners were congregants in the St. Nicholas and St. Thomas churches; a few of its performers were paid explicitly as church musicians, but most were obligated to perform in connection with duties as town musicians or as scholarship students.

Handel's *A Song for St Cecilia's Day* was first heard in 1739 in the secular public theater in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. Italian opera, in which Handel had been deeply involved as a composer and impresario for decades, was in its death throes as a commercial venture, and in its place Handel turned to musical works of other kinds. The year 1739 saw the composition of the oratorios *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt*, respectively dramatic and scenic works drawing on biblical sources. In the years just after the St. Cecilia work and following the composition of *Messiah* not long after, Handel settled on a winning formula with his (mostly dramatic) oratorios presented during the Lenten closure of the London theaters.

Handel's performers were professionals, and his audience members paying—he derived his income from concerts like the one on November 22, 1739 at which *A Song for St Cecilia's Day* premièred. And despite its nominal dedication to a saint and invocation of the creation story and last judgment, the work is distinctly secular, with a whiff of Deism in poet John Dryden's emphasis on the structure of the newly formed world rather than on the worship of its creator. Yet despite the different circumstances there are strong musical parallels between Bach's and Handel's works. The two composers put the same kinds of material to use in the different contexts.

Perhaps the fundamental parallel is the works' construction in multiple movements. It is easy to take this structure for granted, but it is significant that both are cast as a series of self-contained movements, each with unified vocal and instrumental scoring and using consistent musical material. Bach divided the *Magnificat* text by verse, composing one movement for each; Handel's text had been created by Dryden with musical setting (or at least musical types) in mind, and came already divided into numbers.

The tendency to construct large works this way—from individual movements each with a distinct character—went together with an early eighteenth-century convention that called for one affect (human emotion) or topic (kind of piece, like a dance or military invocation) in each. Multi-movement works were divided into distinct and characteristic units, and composers often strode to provide the greatest variety among them.

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The five solo vocal movements in the *Magnificat*, for example, draw on each of the solo voices in turn (soprano 2, soprano 1, bass, tenor, and alto). Each of these movements uses a different and distinctive instrumental complement: ensemble strings, solo oboe, unison strings, transverse flutes—and no instrument at all besides the ever-present basso continuo in the piece for bass voice. And there is a great variety of character, too: joy in the "Et exsultavit," rage in the "Deposuit potentes," a pastoral atmosphere in the "Esurientes implevit bonis," and so on. The "Quia respexit" and alto/tenor duet "Et misericordia" each inject a note of lamentation, and overall there is a complete range of voices, musical types, and sentiments.

Bach never used the word "aria" for settings (like these) of scriptural Latin prose; the term was reserved for pieces that set short poems. But these solo numbers in the *Magnificat* are constructed just like arias, and are exactly parallel to the true arias in *A Song for St Cecilia's Day*. They, too, show Handel covering a wide musical range. There is less variety in vocal scoring than in the *Magnificat*—they are all for soprano or tenor—but there is a similar spectrum of instrumental colors: solo cello, trumpet, solo transverse flute with muted strings (just as in Bach's "Et misericordia"), unison violins, and organ. And there are movements of many types: an obvious military topic in "The trumpet's loud clangour," a hornpipe dance in "Orpheus could lead the savage race."

In this work Handel was less directly concerned with affect and musical topic, and perhaps more focused on the parade of musical instruments described in the text: the "chorded shell," interpreted here as a harp (imitated by cello) in acknowledgment of Jubal, a biblical figure venerated as the first flutist and harpist; the trumpet and the drum as military instruments; the amorous flute and lute; violins evoking a whole range of human emotions (recognizing their role in opera arias); the organ as an instrument of worship; and the lyre as a symbol of music's power. Handel's emphasis on variety among the arias, achieved by scoring and musical character, is just as clear as in Bach's *Magnificat*.

In composing movements that used each instrument (or a fanciful approximation), Handel followed in a long tradition of compositions about music itself. (Bach could do this as well; many of the texts he set also invoked instruments; the *Christmas Oratorio* heard here last year begins "Sound, you drums; ring out, trumpets!") In fact Handel invoked multiple traditions with this work. The 1739 concert took place on the day dedicated to St. Cecilia, regarded (somewhat obscurely) as the patron of musicians. Handel knew the late seventeenth-century tradition of works in her honor, and indeed the text by Dryden he chose had been set to music in 1687 by Giovanni Battista Draghi for a religious celebration of her. Handel and his audience would also have known Henry Purcell's two odes for Cecilia; in choosing this day and this text, Handel invoked an English musical past beloved by his audience.

Bach's *Magnificat* also looks to tradition. One telling moment comes at the end, when the Marian text is rounded off by the "Gloria Patri et Filio," a so-called doxology (words of praise) also heard at the end of liturgically-performed psalms. When this text turns to the words "Sicut erat in principio" (As it was in the beginning), Bach goes back to his music from the opening movement ("Magnificat anima mea Dominum"), a witticism that had been a musical tradition for generations. For the "Suscepit Israel" he turns to an ancient chant intonation played by oboes over three high voices--the tune to which the "Magnificat" had been sung in German since Luther's time. He also invokes the tradition of older church music in the "Sicut locutus est," which draws on a style reminiscent of Palestrina.



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The contexts for these two compositions were different. But Bach and Handel drew on identical conventions, resources, and esthetic ideals in composing them. Both composers knew their places in tradition, and the value—symbolic or commercial—of invoking the past.

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The opening piece on the program is one of J. S. Bach's cantatas for New Year's Day, celebrated as a religious feast as part of the Christmas season. It recognized the eighth day in the life of a Jewish boy—it is the Feast of the Circumcision of Jesus. By Bach's time it was likely to be observed more as Jesus' name day, and indeed the text of "Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied" BWV 190 reflects this. The end of the long middle recitative vows to begin the year with Jesus's name (a symbolic act of devotion), and indeed every line of the duet aria that follows is "Jesus" or "Jesu"; add Bach's musical repetitions of lines and the result is an aria saturated with the name.

The first two movements of the cantata quote the opening lines of a hymn, "Herr Gott, dich loben wir." This is Martin Luther's translation of the Latin "Te Deum laudamus," one of the oldest hymns in the entire Christian repertory, representing a clear reference to tradition in this work as well. The status of this tune as a hymn—a piece of sung music—is made clear by the sudden switch of the voices to unharmonized unison when this text and melody appear in the opening movement. In response to the psalm text that calls for a new song to the Lord, the voices indeed respond with a song. We are meant to hear this not just as praise but as music within a musical composition. Like Handel's work for St. Cecilia, this cantata by Bach calls attention to music-making itself.

(A note on BWV 190: This work is transmitted incompletely. Everything from movement 3 on is fully documented, but the first two movements survive only in their vocal and violin lines. The other lines in these movements—trumpets, oboes, bassoon, viola, and basso continuo—are a speculative modern reconstruction.)

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