



DIRECTOR'S SERIES
A ROYAL OCCASION

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WASHINGTON BACH CONSORT

Dana Marsh, Artistic Director

A Royal Week in October 1727

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Almost no commentator can resist the striking parallels in the lives of the young George Frideric Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach: born in the same year in nearby towns, each trained by famous organists and church musicians, both renowned in their time. Of course Handel pursued a career as an opera composer and impresario, first in Italy and then in London; Bach, in contrast, held positions as court musician and as church-city musician in places close to home. But both found occasion to offer music in honor of great monarchs. Two of their most striking and enduring compositions for royalty, both heard on today's concert, were astonishingly each originally performed within a week of each other.

The Bach work is "Lass, Fürstin, lass noch einen Strahl" BWV 198, not one of the cantatas despite the assignment of a catalogue number among them. It represents Bach's application of musical types and techniques familiar from cantatas and passions to a text designed for a singular occasion in honor of a member of the Saxon royal family.

The precipitating event was the death of the wife of Friedrich August I, ruler of Saxony with a seat in Dresden and one of the electors of Holy Roman Emperor. Electress Christine Eberhardine died on September 5, 1727, and a period of mourning was declared throughout Saxony, including Leipzig where Bach was working at the time. This allowed no church music for an extended period.

But permission was obtained by a Leipzig nobleman, Hans Carl von Kirchbach, for a memorial held on October 17 in the Paulinerkirche, the Leipzig University Church. This secular event featured a long oration by Kirchbach; the public presentation of an ode of mourning by Johann Christoph Gottsched, a professor, literary critic, and advocate of French

classicizing poetry; and the performance of a musical setting of the ode composed by J. S. Bach.

Gottsched's ode is characteristically a strophic poem in honor of a person or allegorical character. (Compare Friedrich Schiller's ode "To Joy" set in part by Beethoven in his Ninth Symphony). In line with Gottsched's interests and his university position, it is full of formal, elevated language. Its construction is typical for an ode but terrible for setting to music because of its relentless succession of nine long, poetically identical stanzas. This was a challenge to the creation of Bach's musical setting, which was described by a chronicler of the time as "nach italiaenischer Art"—in the Italian manner.

That meant the usual succession of solo recitatives and arias, borrowings from contemporary opera, to which the ode's text was poorly suited. Bach coped by refashioning the text, dividing some of the eight-line stanzas in half to yield texts better suited to aria settings. That let him set recitative-aria pairs of eight lines and four lines, respectively, both for soprano and for alto; eight lines each of recitative and aria for tenor; and sixteen lines of recitative (with no aria) for bass, more or less systematically using each of the four voices.

The recitatives are mostly instrumentally accompanied—the motivic sort familiar from Bach's St. Matthew Passion. They show great variety in instrumental scoring and are linked (to some extent) to their paired arias: featured strings in the soprano movements, violas da gamba for alto, and woodwinds for tenor. The work is framed by arias for the four combined voices; except for their vocal scorings they behave just like the solo arias. Movement 7 stands out. In it, Bach carved out a four-line text to set as a chorus ending the first part of the

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ode, which was divided by Kirchbach's oration. This movement is set as though it were a piece of abstract or doctrinal scriptural prose in an old-fashioned and distinctly ecclesiastical musical style.

That churchy reference is probably connected to person and event. Christine was the Saxon Electress but was also the Queen of Poland, a title she held because her husband had converted to Catholicism to ascend to the throne of Poland. This was a matter of some anxiety to Protestant Saxony, still wary after the confessional strife of Thirty Years' War and concerned to the point of deep anxiety about the fate of the Lutheran church at the hands of Catholics.

Christine Eberhardine was revered because she declined to convert; in fact she moved out of Dresden and refused to set foot in Poland. The Leipzig memorial was simultaneously an act of homage to the Dresden court and a recognition of Christine's role as steadfast Lutheran holdout. The need to please the Elector-King explains the references to her as "Queen" throughout the text, but in the praise of her as a model for women and warden of the faith was a message that would have been difficult to miss.

The work is musically elaborate, as one would expect for royalty, but its text and music are also strikingly specific to the situation. For example, the opening choral aria says "And see with how many gushes of tears/We surround your monument." This was metaphorical but also literal, because Leipzigers constructed a temporary sculpture of mourning (a *castrum doloris* or *Trauer-Gerüst*, depicted in a contemporary engraving) around which they could literally gather.

The recitative no. 2 refers to places and people—

Saxony, Meissen, August (the King), and the Prince.

There are more place references in no. 9, most strikingly to Pretzsch and Torgau, cities where Christine Eberhardine had taken up solitary Lutheran residence. The instruction in no. 3 "Be silent, be silent, you lovely strings" is not just symbolic but refers to the ban on music observed state-wide. The text of no. 4 invokes the funeral bells heard regularly in Leipzig, which Bach imitates musically.

And the last choral aria closes with a striking reference, calling on poets and readers: "You poets, write; we would read: / 'She was virtue's own, / The delight and glory of her subjects, / The prize among all queens.'" This mention of poetry in honor of the Queen points to the text of the ode and to the memorial event itself. Bach's setting of this moment is particularly stunning. He sets the quoted words of the poet for unison (octave) voices, suddenly dropping the harmonies created by the four vocal lines. This is a chilling passage in which Gottsched's words come leaping from the busy texture, musically pointing to the event and to the deceased royal heroine it honored.

The Handel royal works on the program are his four Coronation Anthems HWV 258-261, composed for King George II and Queen Caroline. They were heard in Westminster Abbey on October 11, 1727—just a few days before Bach's *Trauer-Ode* was performed in Leipzig.

Their texts are adapted from scripture, mostly Psalms with passages from Isaiah and from 1 Kings, some of which had been used at the coronations of British monarchs for many years. (Henry Purcell's setting of one was still known in Handel's time.) They are all on topics of sovereignty: "Zadok the priest" refers to the act of coronation; "Let thy hand be strengthened"

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calls for mercy and justice in the monarch's reign; "The King shall rejoice" calls for divine blessing; and "My heart is inditing" invokes the women of the royal family—the Queen and the five princesses born to her and George. (Two words in these texts might trip up modern English speakers. "Inditing" here means "proclaiming," and "prevented" (from the Latin, *pre-venire*, "to go before") means "provided spiritual help.")

In the English tradition of so-called "full anthems," these works all call for full vocal scoring—they are choral throughout, with no solo writing. There are some soloistic and duet textures, but they are sung by the chorus or by reduced choral forces. This feature is combined with Handel's frequent writing in more than four vocal lines, producing a particularly opulent choral sonority. The largest of the anthems call for an equally splendid instrumental scoring, with trumpets and drums—emblems of royalty and rejoicing. The overall effect is clearly meant as a projection of royal power. Performed by the large forces of the Abbey and Chapel Royal, they must have made a striking impression.

Handel aims for various effects in the four anthems. "Zadok the priest" opens with a stately, slowly-building *sinfonia* that prepares the entrance of massed voices together with trumpets and drums. A lilting next section, again with full instrumentation, invokes the rejoicing mentioned in the text. The goal is a pause on the words "and said" that leads to exclamations of "God save the King." If you are reminded of the "Hallelujah Chorus" it is with good reason; Handel's aim here is a similar invocation of awe in his listeners—even sublime awe—as the divine and the regal intermingle.

"Let thy hand be strengthened" opens with a pair of arias for chorus, each with contrasting affect. The first is a typical Handelian tune in ordinary tempo, an aria calling (as does the whole anthem) for just strings and oboes, omitting the festive trumpets and drums. The second aria is a limpid and drooping slow movement with an expressive melodic line, poignant harmonies, and passages over a sustained bass note. The overall effect is somewhat mournful. The final "Alleluja" invokes an ecclesiastical style, again in a restrained way without trumpets. The text of this anthem did not particularly demand these less festive treatments, but Handel was probably looking for ways to inject moments of affective contrast to make the celebratory music even more splendid.

"The King shall rejoice" returns to the celebratory mode. But Handel treats the second segment of text, "Exceeding glad shall he be of thy salvation," as a passage of gracious repose between celebrations. "Thou hast prevented him" then gradually re-introduces the brass instruments into a texture not obviously designed for them. The anthem closes with an "Alleluja" that is clearly in the native style of the trumpets and drums.

"My heart is inditing" begins in a restrained manner, opening with an ensemble aria that particularly focuses on individual voices and choral sections. Handel bridges the gap to the celebratory style by repeating its text with the full chorus together with trumpets and drums. A pair of contrasting choral arias—one graceful and the other invoking the pastoral—forms the center of this anthem, designed for the coronation of the queen. The final section returns to the imperial style, first without

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trumpets and drums and then with them—the sound most closely associated with Handel’s royal music.

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The program opens with a work not connected with royalty. J. S. Bach’s “Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit” BWV 106 is a very old-fashioned piece, and represents the sort of late-seventeenth century church style that would have been known to the young Bach and Handel. It is thought to be one of a handful of Bach cantatas dating from early in his career, works that were of no practical use to him in an era that came to demand the new, modern kind of cantata with up-to-date poetry set as recitatives and arias.

The work’s text consists almost entirely of scriptural dicta (pithy biblical sayings drawn from both the Hebrew and New Testaments), all clearly on the topic of human mortality, together with a couple of hymn stanzas near the end. They are set as a series of mostly continuous musical sections, and some (like the opening vocal section) divide their text into the smallest possible units, changing musical character with each phrase.

The work has typically been assumed to have been for a funeral, but we do not actually know that. Perhaps the best clue we have to its origin—there are no original sources, just much later copies that do not help us determine the date of composition or purpose—is the discovery of a devotional prayer book from Bach’s time that includes a similar compilation of texts on the topic of death. It is not difficult to imagine that the work was meant to fill the same meditative purpose, offering a series of

reflections on mortality.

“Gottes Zeit” was an antique piece by 1727, but if you listen carefully you can hear connections to the more modern works by Bach and Handel on the program. Like the Coronation Anthems, BWV 106’s text is a compilation of scriptural passages concentrating on one theme—mortality in the case of the cantata, sovereignty in the anthems. And like Bach’s Trauer-Ode, “Gottes Zeit” presents striking and subdued instrumental ensembles, featuring lutes and violas da gamba in the work for the Queen and Electress, recorders and gambas in the early composition. These were colors associated with mourning, whether for royalty or not—a link between very different societal worlds served by similar musical gestures.

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