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Lutheran Christmas Motets (and Beyond)

The church repertory we associate most closely with Johann Sebastian Bach—pieces like the *Christmas Oratorio* and cantatas—was big-city music. Only large and well-to-do places and courts in smaller towns could mount pieces that involved large and diverse ensembles, professional-level singing and playing, and the most up-to-date styles. Everyday church music was not only more manageable but was also was stylistically distinct. Lutheran composers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries cultivated an older musical tradition as well, the motet, both in small towns and alongside more ambitious music in bigger cities.

The motet was an inheritance from the sixteenth century, and the music of Palestrina stood as the ideal. German musicians understood a motet to be a church composition that used ensemble voices but no independent instruments. In the Palestrina model, each of the voices in a motet was of equal importance—there was no leading melody and no consistent foundation of a supporting bass line. Instead, the musical texture came from the combination of several equally interesting and important voices. They related to each other by shared material presented in overlapping but independent lines in imitation of each other (as in a round or a fugue). This kind of writing is often called counterpoint, literally meaning "note against note" and suggesting a way of composing and hearing that regarded each voice as independent.

This kind of piece was part of the training of every Lutheran church musician, and a repertory from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was published in large collections for use in schools and in worship. One of the most famous remained in print through Bach's time, and we have a receipt for his purchase of a replacement copy for the St. Thomas School. Many of these pieces were even simpler than the motets that emulated Palestrina. Rather than creating simultaneous contrapuntal lines, they treated their voices as a unity, setting the text in simultaneous declamation that loosely followed the accents of speech. Many called for two four-voice ensembles used in opposition; this eight-voice double-chorus scoring became a norm, as did the performance of older works with a basso continuo line played by a bass instrument and organ.

Sixteenth-century motets typically set scriptural prose texts, and that legacy continued: German motets most often set short, pithy biblical passages known as *dicta* or *Sprüche*, the kind of passage that might be highlighted in a printed bible or selected as the topic of a sermon. Building on a musical tradition established by composers in the circle of Martin Luther, other German motets set chorale (hymn) texts and melodies. Particularly beloved in central Germany were motets that combined the two types, presenting a biblical dictum together with a hymn stanza chosen to complement it, representing the two kinds of text central to Lutheran worship.

However they were constructed, motets had a couple of distinctive features beyond their scoring without independent instruments. Perhaps the most important is their organization. Motets were constructed in a series of small sections. A composer treated a unit of text, perhaps repeating it, before reaching a cadence (musical close) and then taking up the next phrase. A motet thus consisted of a chain of short sections defined by text phrases. The other characteristic feature concerned the relationship between words and music. Motets were generally not concerned with expressing the meaning of their texts, nor with provoking an emotional response in the listener in the way music with solo voices and instruments aimed to do. In this, their goals, focused on the unfolding of the text rather than its expression, were different from the theatrically-derived music of cantatas that sought to move listeners' affections.

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This program samples seventeenth-century German motets associated with Christmas, a time in the liturgical calendar closely associated with the genre, and some early eighteenth-century responses to the venerable type. The oldest work on the program is a Magnificat setting by Hieronymous Praetorius, an organist and composer active in Hamburg in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This is not, strictly speaking, a motet, but in its setting of a scriptural canticle (from Luke's gospel, in the voice of Mary) and its scoring for eight-voice double chorus it is musically just like one. It presents the odd numbered verses of the Magnificat in chant, and the even numbered ones in alternation for eight voices. The setting is mostly old-fashioned in its restrained declamation using the voices in groups of four, but a few words ("dispersit superbos," "dimisit") are presented in a more vivid way. The version of this work heard here includes four inserted Christmas hymns: one stanza of "In dulci jubilo" and three of "Joseph lieber, Joseph mein," so-called macaronic tunes that combine Latin and German. The hymn settings are mostly in simultaneous declamation with the two choirs in opposition, a classic motet texture.

The two motets here by Johann Hermann Schein were published in 1615 in Leipzig, where Schein served as Cantor of the St. Thomas School, the position J. S. Bach was to hold about a hundred years later. Each sets a biblical dictum associated with Christmas. "Quem vidistis pastores" (a responsory derived from scripture) is for eight-voice double chorus and is almost entirely in simultaneous declamation that roughly follows word accents. (The several "Alleluia" passages are animated exceptions.) "Verbum caro factum est" also displays simultaneous declamation and the sound of opposing choirs, but Schein achieves the effect with only six voices, creating the impression of two ensembles by a changing combination of voices used a few at a time.

Heinrich Schütz is represented by works from his 1648 *Geistliche Chor-Music*. Schütz himself had largely been responsible for the introduction of modern style into German church music, composing many so-called sacred concertos that contrasted stylistically with old-fashioned motets. But he evidently had some doubts; in a preface to the 1648 collection he warned that German composers first needed to master strict style (the motet) before composing in the new expressive Italianate one. The *Geistliche Chor-Music* was his demonstration of the continued possibilities of what he called a "hard nut," and the "first real test" of a composer. He specifically characterized this as music without a basso continuo line, turning back to the sixteenth-century ideal of equal voices in counterpoint.

The texts of all four Schütz motets are Christmas dicta, and in fact they present both imitative counterpoint and simultaneous declamation of the text. All proceed phrase by phrase through their texts, sometimes doubling back to repeat several phrases to create more ambitious forms. Characteristically the works are not strongly responsive to the meanings of their text, but more concerned with its clear declamation. They are distinguished from sixteenth-century models by the wide range notes that carry syllables of text, producing not only the deliberate pace of older motets but also a quicker one, especially towards the end of a work.

The early eighteenth-century continuation of the Christmas motet tradition is illustrated by "Uns ist ein Kind geboren" by Johann Ludwig Bach, a cousin of J. S. Bach who worked at the small court in Meiningen and with whom Johann Sebastian was in close contact. In many respects this motet follows earlier models: It sets a biblical dictum, treating it phrase by phrase; it is scored for eight voices in two choirs; and much of its declamation is familiarly simultaneous. But the work is substantially longer than most older motets, grouping text phrases and their settings into distinct movements, a clear influence of the modern cantata.

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The last section invokes the imitative counterpoint of early models, and the previous one presents its text over a chant tune in long notes, another old-fashioned gesture. A distinctive local feature is the threefold repetition of the first word ("Uns, uns, uns") as rhetorical call to attention that became a cliché of central German motets.

Johann Ludwig's "Das ist meine Freude" is not for Christmas but shows many of the same motet features, including eight-voice scoring and phrase-by-phrase musical treatment. Its vocal lines are distinctly more modern in their rhythmic activity compared to older models but are still fundamentally simultaneous in their declamation of text. The formulaic opening ("Das, das, das") is further used as a kind of refrain, also a modern gesture.

J. S. Bach's "Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her" represents his contribution to the central German Christmas motet tradition. It sets the first stanza of a hymn by Martin Luther in a kind of setting that also goes back to his time. The chorale melody is presented phrase by phrase in the soprano in long notes, supported by three other voices that move in contrapuntal imitation of each other. Their material is drawn from successive hymn phrases, entering before the "real" presentation of the tune in the soprano. This work was not a free-standing motet but rather an insertion in Bach's Magnificat BWV 243, representing the same German tradition of interpolation of Christmas hymns followed by H. Praetorius.

Two additional works on the program are part of the small repertory of J. S. Bach's motets that simultaneously reflect the motet tradition and bring modern musical ideas to it. Neither is connected with Christmas. "Komm, Jesu, komm" BWV 229 is probably from Bach's Leipzig years, but its exact date and purpose are unknown. Its hymn-like funereal text is entirely expected for a motet (motets were also used for memorials) but is handled unusually. Bach sets the first stanza of this poem for eight-part double chorus, treating it as though it were a biblical text in a series of short sections. Each text phrase is given its own musical treatment, with changes of texture, character, thematic material and sometimes musical meter. The final line of the text ("Ich bin der rechte Weg," a paraphrase of a verse from John's gospel), is strongly emphasized, receiving an extended treatment in musical syntax that is distinctly eighteenth-century. Bach sets the last stanza as a separate movement, a tune-dominated setting of a poem that Bach and his contemporaries called an "aria."

There are longstanding questions about the authenticity of the other Bach motet on the program, "Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden" BWV 230, and even about its status as a motet. The work cannot be traced any further back than a publisher's catalogue from the first years of the nineteenth century that offered copies of the work for sale under J. S. Bach's name. The one surviving early manuscript copy credits the piece only to "Sig. Bach," leaving the exact attribution in question, as many members of the Bach family composed motets. J. S. Bach's authorship probably has to be considered plausible but not well documented.

It is even difficult to be sure that this work was conceived as a motet. It has a partly independent basso continuo line, characteristic of many eighteenth-century motets but more often encountered in cantatas. Certainly the Psalm text is appropriate to a motet, and the lack of independent instruments points clearly to motet style as does the (extended) phrase-by-phrase treatment of the text. Perhaps this work started as a motet-like movement in a cantata, where it would have pointed clearly to the legacy of motets from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

--Daniel R. Melamed