

THE VOCAL MUSIC OF J.S. BACH¹**CLASS 6 Oct 26 PERFORMANCE PRACTICE; LEIPZIG CANTATAS I**

Outline

1. Historically-informed performances of Baroque music have become common since the revival of interest in early music, instruments, and performance styles in the 1950s. These performances include two key elements: period instruments, and period performance details.
2. In early 1723 Bach was offered and accepted the post of cantor (director of church music) at the main churches in Leipzig. Bach's duties included teaching singing, violin, and other instruments at the church school, and providing all the music for Sunday services at the 4 major churches in the city.
3. In his first 6 years in Leipzig, Bach composed over 200 cantatas for performance at Sunday services; for long stretches during this time he was composing one cantata per week. This is perhaps the most astonishing feat of sustained musical creativity in history.
4. Bach's vocal style combines German-style chorales (hymn tunes) and large complex choruses, with Italian-style arias and solo pieces.

Musical selections from

- Sonata for violin and continuo BWV 1021
- Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, movement 1
- Cantata 65, "Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen" (They will all come forth out of Sheba), 1. opening chorus, 4. aria for bass with oboe da caccia obbligato
- Cantata 109, "Ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Unglauben" (I believe, dear Lord, help my unbelief), 1. opening chorus

How should Bach be performed today?

When Bach died in 1750, he had published only a small sample of his prodigious output. Books I and II of *The Well-tempered Clavier* continued to circulate among connoisseurs, including Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. But nearly all of his vocal music disappeared from public hearing, and much of it was lost. Not until 1829 was one of his great vocal compositions performed again, *The Passion According to St. Matthew*, in a concert produced and conducted by Felix Mendelssohn. That concert touched off a Bach revival that continues to this day.

By 1829 performance practice had changed greatly since Bach's day: orchestras had expanded to meet new expressive demands of composers such as Beethoven, and the need for more sound to fill the larger concert halls. The Romantic movement encouraged emotion and individualism among players. The *St. Matthew* performance that Mendelssohn conducted in 1829 would have sounded strange to Bach. As the nineteenth century continued, the way concert music was played moved even further away from what Bach would have recognized, eventually reaching the gigantic orchestras of Mahler and Richard Strauss, and the stentorian voiced demanded by Wagner. By the early twentieth century, Handel's *Messiah* and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* were being performed by small armies of performers, producing effects far different from the small Baroque ensembles that the composers had written for.

These romantic performance traditions carried over into the recording era. Before about 1960, most Bach recordings used large choruses—think of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir—and large orchestras playing modern instruments. Tempos could be painfully slow by today's standards.

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For Baroque music, the tide began to turn after World War II. In the early 1960s, Karl Richter and the Munich Bach Orchestra and Chorus recorded Bach's passions and oratorios, and many of his cantatas. These recordings still sound old-fashioned to modern ears, but aimed to return to something Bach would have recognized.

Nicholas Harnoncourt and the Concentus Musicus Wien, and Gustave Leonhardt with his ensembles, led the historically-informed school of playing even further, using small ensembles playing reproductions of 17th and 18th century instruments. Their recordings of Bach cantatas used countertenors (male altos) instead of female altos, as female voices would not have been allowed in Lutheran worship of Bach's time. Some recordings even used boy sopranos as soloists, on the argument that these were the soloists Bach had available. In the 1970s, Helmut Rilling with the Bach Collegium Stuttgart recorded many of the cantatas, employing a performance style somewhere between the older romantic style and the light dry style favored today.

Some conductors push the HIP style to what seems to me an extreme, with overly fast tempos, an absolute minimum of singers, a staccato singing style, or all three. I think of Joshua Rifkin, or Reinhardt Goebel and Musica Antiqua Köln in this category. Maybe this is the direction that Baroque performance is moving, but for now I prefer more moderate approach of conductors like Gardiner, Suzuki, and Herreweghe.

Musical example: the same piece as interpreted by three performers in three different eras.

Bach, Sonata for violin and continuo BWV 1021, movement 1

1. Adolph Busch, violin [pianist unstated, perhaps Edwin Fischer]
2. Arthur Grumiaux, violin
3. Musica Antiqua Köln, Reinhardt Gobel, violin

Historically-informed performances (HIP) attempts to give audiences the experience of hearing music as the composer conceived it. To achieve this, HIP includes two key elements: specialized equipment, or instruments from the period in question, and stylistic details reflecting performance practice at the time.

Bach wrote for performance in small spaces, churches and the houses of aristocrats. Instruments of the period were lighter, structurally less stiff, and their sound did not carry as far as modern instruments in modern concert halls.

Baroque-style violins use gut strings rather than steel, and players rest the instrument on their collarbone rather than on a chin rest or shoulder rest, as players do today. Baroque bows are concave rather than convex like modern bows, making a soft sound at the tip of the bow. Instead of being balanced on an endpin, the Baroque cello and viola da gamba are played by gripping the instrument between the player's calves.

Trumpets and horns lack valves, so players must get all the pitches with their lips alone, using the natural overtone series. Oboes have only one key instead of many. Flutes are made of wood instead of silver, and have only one or two keys instead of a multitude.

Keyboard parts call for harpsichord or organ instead of piano, and the written part often consists of only a bass line with little numbers indicating what chords the right hand should play.

Singers use less vibrato than their modern counterparts, and generally sing softer. Male countertenors often replace female altos.

Performance details include small ensembles, usually only one or two players on a part. Players often stand rather than sit. Some conductors lead their HIP from the keyboard—Bach often led performances of

his own music from the harpsichord or organ—and some HIP groups dispense with a conductor altogether.

Concert pitch was generally lower during the Baroque than it is today, although there was great variation from one town to the next, depending on how the local church organs were tuned. Many of today's HIP ensembles tune to A=415 Hertz, rather than today's standard concert pitch of A=440 Hertz, a difference of about a half step.

Musical example:

Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, movement 1

1. modern ensemble
2. HIP ensemble

Note that the modern ensemble is seated except for the flute and violin soloists. On long notes, players maintain a steady volume to the end of the note, using a relatively wide vibrato. In the HIP ensemble, the players stand, except for cellist and harpsichordist, and move to the rhythm of the music. Long notes taper to a soft ending. The tempo is brisk, and there is more loud-soft contrast between phrases. The modern ensemble plays a pitch of A=450, even higher than standard modern concert pitch. The HIP group, in contrast, plays at the lower Baroque pitch of A=415.

Cantata 65 "Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen" (They will all come forth out of Sheba)

Bach wrote this cantata during his first year in Leipzig, to be performed on Twelfth Night, the festival of the three kings, on January 6, 1724. It is one of five cantatas written for the two week period between Christmas Eve and January 6. As we listen, we can imagine that we are in Bach's church in Leipzig, listening to the minister recount the story of the three kings arriving in Bethlehem with their gifts for the Christ child. The opening chorus, in 12/8 time, has a peaceful lilt, something like the sinfonia of the Christmas Oratorio, which would have been heard the previous week. Bach gives an oriental sound to the movement by his choice of instruments. Next comes a sensitive, intimate chorale, as the three kings arrive. Next comes a recitative and aria for the bass, the central movement of the cantata, in which the singer asks what we ordinary people, who are not kings, can offer if we have no gold or frankincense. The answer is that we can offer ourselves, our hearts. A lively aria follows for tenor with oboe da caccia and two recorders. The cantata concludes, as did so many others, with a chorale, a simple familiar tune beautifully harmonized.

<p>1. Chor <i>Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen, Gold und Weihrauch bringen und des Herren Lob verkündigen. (Isaiah 60:6)</i></p>	<p>1. Chorus <i>They will all come forth out of Sheba, bringing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.</i></p>
<p>4. Arie B Gold aus Ophir ist zu schlecht, Weg, nur weg mit eitlen Gaben, Die ihr aus der Erde brecht! Jesus will das Herze haben. Schenke dies, o Christenschar, Jesu zu dem neuen Jahr!</p>	<p>4. Aria Bass Gold from Ophir is too meager; away, away with vain gifts that you mine from the earth! Jesus wants to have your heart. Offer this, o Christian throng, to Jesus for the new Year!</p>

6. Arie T Nimm mich dir zu eigen hin, Nimm mein Herze zum Geschenke. Alles, alles, was ich bin, Was ich rede, tu und denke, Soll, mein Heiland, nur allein Dir zum Dienst gewidmet sein.	6. Aria Tenor Take me to Yourself as Your own, take my heart as a present. All, all that I am, what I say, do, and think, shall alone, my Savior, be dedicated to Your service.
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Cantata 109, "Ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Unglauben" (I believe, dear Lord, help my unbelief), 1. opening chorus

Musical selections

Movement 1, chorus

Movement 6, chorale. Video: Bachstiftung, R. Lutz, conductor

1. Chor <i>Ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Unglauben!</i> (Mark 9:24)	1. Chorus <i>I believe, dear Lord, help my unbelief!</i>
6. Choral Wer hofft in Gott un dem vertraut, Der wird nummer zuschanden; Denn wer auf diesen Felsen baut, Ob ihm gleich geht zuhanden Viel Unfalls hie, hab ich doch nie Den Menschen sehen fallen, Der sich verläßt auf Gottes Trost; Er hilft sein' Gläubgen allen.	6. Chorale Whoever hopes in God and trusts in Him, will never be put to shame; for whoever builds on this rock, although at the moment he be beset by many misfortunes, yet I have never seen those people fail who rely on God's consolation; He helps all His faithful ones.

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*,

Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*. Entries for the cantatas discussed here are listed alphabetically by the German title.

Wikipedia, "Historically informed performance." Good summary of the state of HIP, and the controversies that surround it.

For choral singers: vocal scores for

Cantata 65 at <https://www.bach-cantatas.com/Scores/BWV065-V&P.pdf>

Cantata 109 at <https://www.bach-cantatas.com/Scores/BWV109-V&P.pdf>

Appendix

What would Handel do? Historically informed performance, then and now

By [Matthew Lynch](#)

How many people played in the orchestra in the première of Handel's *Messiah*? What sort of instruments were they using? What sorts of singing and instrumental technique did they have? How did the audience react? And, most importantly, what did it sound like? Since the mid 20th century, musicians have been trying to answer these questions, with a view to bringing something close to the true sound and atmosphere of Handel's music to modern audiences.

Historically informed performance (HIP) has its roots in Arnold Dolmetsch's work with the recorder, which extends right back into the late 19th century. He built his first lute in 1893 and went on to build clavichords and harpsichords, eventually publishing *The Interpretation of the Music of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries* in 1915. Dolmetsch's book was a real milestone in early music performance, and we also have him to thank for the resurgence of the recorder (and also for its modern dismissal as a horrible instrument for small children): it was Dolmetsch who first recommended it as an instrument for children in English schools.

Alongside Dolmetsch, early pioneers in Germany, Switzerland and France established concert series for early music in the 1920s, bringing back forgotten instruments such as the viola da gamba and viola d'amore. These included full performances of Bach's Passions and Monteverdi's *Vespers* but still constituted mostly isolated events. The floodgates didn't truly open until after the Second World War. And it was the Germans who got there first, founding the first permanent period instrument orchestra in 1954. But the Cappella Coloniensis, which still exists today, was gradually joined by stiff competition in the 60s, 70s and 80s, mostly in London, Basel, and the Netherlands.

As the HIP movement developed in the second half of the 20th century, the questions changed. To begin with, people just wanted to rediscover old music. Then came the desire to perform it on the original instruments and with contemporaneous techniques of playing and interpretation. As the musicologist John Tobin said as early as 1950: "To sing (or play) *Messiah* with purely Handel's notes may be to perform *Messiah* as Handel wrote it, but it will not be as the audiences that listened to the work under Handel's direction heard it, or as he intended it to be heard."

How would Handel have played an appoggiatura in Italy in 1708? Would he have played it differently in London in 1730? Maybe he played it differently on the organ to on the harpsichord, and differently in one harmonic context to another. What ornaments would he have expected from his performers? And what pitch and scale did they use?

Performers have grappled with these questions for decades. Academics such as Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and Thurston Dart have made whole careers out of them, and the results have been not only academically but musically invigorating. Trevor Pinnock's 1988 recording of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos, to take just one example, is not just an attempt to recreate a lost musical artifact, but creative music-making at its finest.

But the HIP movement has always had its critics. One of the most prominent and vocal is the American musicologist Richard Taruskin, many of whose writings on the subject are collected in the volume *Text and Act*. Among Taruskin's main criticisms is the authenticity of HIP. The desire to recreate the past and remain true to composers' intentions spawned from the division between composer and performer (the creative and the re-creative processes) started with Beethoven (a composer who couldn't perform his own works) but remained largely latent in the 19th century (with composer-performers from Mendelssohn through Brahms and Liszt to Mahler), re-emerging in the 20th century, when Stravinsky began referring to performers as "executants" rather than interpreters. The musicologist/philosopher Lydia Goehr connects this with contemporary ideas of authorship and the concept of the musical work

as a self-contained entity; music has transitioned from a performance-based art to a text-based one, with the score representing a perfect conception of the music, which is then only imperfectly rendered in performance. Thus the idea that HIP is desirable, or that it is connected to the performance tradition it attempts to recreate, is questionable.

Another of Taruskin's problems with HIP is the idea that "what is not permitted is prohibited". As he points out, "there is nothing you can do... and be sure that someone will not say, 'Hey, you can't do that!' If you want no one to say it you must do nothing – as many do in the name of 'authenticity'". In order to preserve authenticity, HIP musicians play notes and not music, or so the argument goes. HIP should be a means to an end, that end being imaginative music-making, but many feel that HIP is often an end in itself.

This argument comes not just from Taruskin but from musicologists, critics, and musicians everywhere. Nigel Kennedy claimed as late as 2011 that "specialists are pushing Bach into... a ghetto, which leaves many people feeling that Bach's music is merely mathematical and technical. I see it as my job to try to keep Bach in the mainstream and present his music with, rather than without, its emotional core." It is sentiments like this that have led to many of the 21st century's developments in the ways Baroque music is performed.

In 2010 the 55-year-old Sir Simon Rattle gave performances of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in Birmingham with the CBSO. It is well known that Rattle didn't rush into the core orchestral repertoire, always waiting until he felt ready for it (how many big-name conductors wait until they're 54 to release their first Brahms symphony?) – but Rattle was a harpsichordist in his youth, and had consequently played a lot of Bach. What held him back? And, more importantly, why did he come back to this repertoire when he did? In a [2010 interview](#) for the Telegraph, he said:

When I started I just couldn't live with the style that was current then. It was the end of that era when Bach was played in a way which was impassioned, but also grotesque. And then there was this huge transition in Baroque style just getting under way, so it was a confusing time... What really counts isn't whether your instrument is Baroque or modern, it's your mind-set. It's having a sense of style, and also realising that there's no right way to play Bach.

Rattle has in fact been building up to Bach since the late 1980s when he worked with the then newly formed period ensemble the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, on a performance of Mozart's *Idomeneo*. Rattle has described this as "an unforgettable time" for him. He has gone on to become one of the OAE's principal artists, though his work with them consists largely of Classical and Romantic works, extending right up to the 20th-century repertoire for which Rattle is best known. In the last few years, modern orchestras have been rediscovering Baroque music, not only under their principal conductors, but in the hands of specialists. Emmanuelle Haïm, John Eliot Gardiner, Trevor Pinnock and Ton Koopman have all stood on the podium (or sat at the harpsichord) for the Berlin Philharmonic, and we have seen some of the first new recordings from major orchestras of Bach's large-scale choral works (the B minor Mass, the Passions and the Christmas Oratorio) for several decades under the likes of Ricardo Chailly and Simon Rattle.

However, perhaps most exciting of all are the new developments in HIP itself. The movement has become increasingly free of rigidity. Performers are recognising that there is so much that we don't and cannot know about Baroque performance practice, and that imagination and liberties can (and must) be taken in an attempt to fill the gaps. Recorder player Piers Adams started the early music group [Red Priest](#) in 1997 in attempt to brush the dry academic reputation of HIP aside, putting showmanship and virtuosity alongside a regard for period performance techniques. Even more mainstream HIP recordings and performances, particularly of opera, engage more freely and playfully with their texts than would have been the case 20 or 30 years ago. If we look at Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, a comparison of [Andrew Parrott's 1981 recording](#) with [Emmanuelle Haïm's 2003 version](#) shows how HIP developed in in those 20 years better than any article.

<https://bachtrack.com/nov-2013-baroque-historically-informed>

Notes on Cantata 65

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Many cantatas for the Christmas season are not deeply involved with the Christmas story, but assume a contemplative attitude with a minimum of narrative. The Cantata BWV 65 not only directly quotes Isaiah's prediction of the Wise Men, but contrasts it with a chorale description of how that prediction came true. Thus, the unusual placement of a chorale immediately after the opening chorus sets off the principal thrust of the piece: the gifts of the Wise Men are a reflection of the gift of God in fulfilling the words of Isaiah.

The opening chorus has a wonderful, exotic, "Eastern" sounding orchestration with pairs of recorders, oboes da caccia and horns as well as the usual strings and continuo. The loping 9/8 meter gives the piece a charming "camel music" quality. This cantata contains the only example of horns in C in all of Bach's music. The beginning tutti shows the richness of color available to Bach with this combination of instruments. The sound of the piece comes not only from the exotic combination of instruments but also from the abundance of octave doublings. This interest in octaves culminates in the final cadence of the tutti, which contains a rarely-heard unison from the entire orchestra. The choral writing is marvelously varied with block-like writing, imitative writing, and a full-fledged choral fugue. In his book "The Compositional Process of J.S. Bach," Robert Marshall describes ingeniously how Bach "thinks on his feet" in the writing of this fugue. In fact, one of the great glories of the first Jahrgang is the new way in which Bach is able to fold choral fugues into a more homophonic texture. This is particularly striking in a work such as this that has horns with few available chromatic notes. Bach makes an event out of the return of the horns to the orchestral texture by surprisingly overlapping them with the end of the fugue.

The chorale that follows, a verse of "Ein Kind, geboren zu Bethlehem," is austere, almost barren in its harmonization. It is as if the richness of Isaiah's prophecy is contrasted with the meager circumstances of Christ's birth. The recitative that follows is a classic example of Bach's sensitivity to the shape and function of the text. The first half, which recounts the story of the wise men, begins in F major and modulates to G major. At the beginning of the contemplative section, where the speaker examines how these events affect him, the bass moves down to a six-four-two chord and sends the recitative in a harmonically different direction.

Bach uses the dark sound of the two oboes da caccia as obbligati for the bass aria. Notice how the opening theme, so closely imitative and evocative of gold, is transformed into the gold torn from the earth by the drop of an octave at the end of the third line. The canon here is exclusively associated with the inadequacy of the gold offerings. The offering of the Christian's heart is accompanied by euphonious parallel thirds in the obbligato instruments.

The secco tenor recitative is appropriately didactic, and offers a perfect foil for the return to the extravagant orchestration that accompanies the opening of the next tenor aria. The main tune of this aria is clearly related to the opening idea of the chorus. Even more, the "oriental" octave doublings bring us back into that world. There is something popular in the character of this spirited piece. It is bar-form, something rather unusual in non-chorale related pieces in Bach. The simple folksy vocal writing at the beginning is a wonderful contrast to the exuberant melismas of the final section.

Not only the choice of a verse from "Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit," but also its austere harmonization, is surprising compared to the color of the rest of the cantata. Perhaps Bach is preparing us for the sobriety of the Epiphany season. Its simplicity is very much in keeping with the presentation of the other chorale, and gives us a slightly different relationship between the chorale and the concerted music that we are used to in first Jahrgang pieces.