

PHILADELPHIA CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

a life more beautiful

PREVIEW
NOTES

Gamut Bach Ensemble

Sarah Shafer, soprano; Ashlee Bickley, mezzo; Daniel McGrew, tenor; Edward Vogel, baritone; Giorgio Consolati, flute; Harrison Linsey, oboe & Donovan Bown, oboe/oboe d'amore; Emilie-Anne Gendron & Stephen Kim, violin; En-Chi Cheng, viola; Zachary Mowitz, cello; Tobias Vigneau, double bass; Jonathan Oddie, organ; Koji Otsuki, director

Wednesday, May 14 – 7:30 PM

Church of the Holy Trinity

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Simply put, a cantata is a vocal composition with accompanying instruments comprising multiple movements. For composers in Protestant Germany like J.S. Bach, the cantatas intended for the Lutheran liturgy became a significant part of their oeuvres. G.P. Telemann and C. Graupner each left more than a thousand church cantatas. Bach supposedly wrote about 300 of his own, but only 195, including ones that require minor reconstruction, are extant and performable. Still, so many uniquely amazing pieces of music are there for us to expose, explore, and savor. This evening, we visit three Bach church cantatas in their entirety that are unique in their own ways, along with four selected movements.

Typically, the text of a church cantata directly relates to the pericopes appointed in the lectionary for the particular day in the liturgical calendar. For example, a sermon for the service on the 16th Sunday after Trinity and the cantata that accompanies it (i.e., the first cantata in the program this evening) would both draw from the narrative of Jesus raising a widow's dead son in Nain (Luke 7:11-17), as this part is the prescribed Gospel lesson of the day. **Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben** (Dearest God, when will I die?), **BWV 8**, associates the young man's rising from the dead with one's own death. The cantatas BWV 161, 95, and 27 also share the death theme as they are all for the same Sunday in the liturgical calendar.

Jesu, der du meine Seele (Jesus, you who my soul), **BWV 78**, was premiered only two weeks before BWV 8, on the 14th Sunday after Trinity in 1724 (September 10). The Gospel lesson of the day, Luke 17:11-19 (the healing of the

ten lepers), and the chorale featured in this cantata do not seem to relate directly, but the healing, in essence, is the salvation of the soul through Christ's Passion; this chorale is indeed a Passion chorale with emphasis of cleansing the believers. In the opening chorus, Bach magically combines the chorale, which is somewhat limited harmonically by the identifiable melody, with the form of Passacaglia, whose nature can also be restrictive as it is built on the ground bass. While the soprano and flute parts carry the cantus firmus (chorale melody), the lower three vocal parts, in profound counterpoint, bind the chorale materials with the ground bass treated as a theme, which is a chromatic fourth (often referred to as lament bass).

In the next movement, the previous chromatic descending theme is replaced by the diatonic ascension filled with joy figures, with the continuo parts representing the 'diligent steps' from the text. In the following two movements (Nos. 3 and 4), the viewpoint turns introspective, and to one's sin; the focus now is on the cross and Christ the victor. In movement 5, the bass lets us revisit the significance of the Passion, and sings in the next movement (No. 6) that His Word gives hope. It is like an oboe concerto with voice. An energetic and brisk feel seems to portray one's renewed and cloudless faith. We finally arrive at the ending chorale—with the spiritual journey that the music took us, with such elaboration, this simple cantional-style chorale contrasts with previous movements and touches our heart more deeply.

Was frag ich nach der Welt (What do I ask of the world), **BWV 94**, was premiered four weeks before BWV 78. From

this one, Bach started to include virtuosic and/or delicate solo flute writing, not found earlier, in those Trinitytide cantatas in 1724, including those two other cantatas in the program this evening. Bach likely had, at his disposal, one particularly gifted flutist in Leipzig during that time, for whom he meant those parts.

The connection between the pericopes and the text is not evident in this case. The text, based on the chorale by Balthasar Kindermann, is about the rejection of the world. It is the opposition between the faithful Christian with his love for Jesus and the earthly and materialistic things that are fragile and transient. The anonymous author of the text followed the base chorale text closely in constructing the cantata text, and Bach, in response, did the same with the chorale melody; originally composed by Ahasverus Fritsch (pub. 1679), the melody appears in various forms in inner movements.