

28. J.S. Bach

Cantata No.48: Ich Elender Mensch

Movements I-IV

For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding

Introduction

A cantata is a work for one or more voices with an instrumental accompaniment. Though the word 'cantata' was used in Italy in the late sixteenth century, it was from about 1620 or so that it became perhaps the most important form of vocal music of the Baroque period outside opera and oratorio.

Cantatas were written using both sacred and secular texts and in Italy almost every composer of standing cultivated the form. During the seventeenth century, it typically grew from a comparatively short piece, accompanied only by continuo, into an extended, orchestrally-accompanied complex of several movements. At the same time, the distinction between recitative, a kind of speech-like singing of a text, and aria, a more song-like movement, often with instrumental obbligato, grew more pronounced.

Leading composers of such works included Antonio Caldara (c.1670-1736), Tomaso Albinoni (1671-1750) and Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) in Venice and Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725) in Naples. George Frideric Handel (1685-1759), who spent four years from 1706 in Italy, mainly in Rome, also wrote many examples.

The German Cantata

In Germany, a cantata was much more likely to be a religious work composed for the liturgy of the Lutheran Church. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that the many examples of the genre were actually called 'cantatas', before then being known as Kirchenstück or Kirchenmusik ('Church piece' or 'Church music').

In North Germany, composers such as Franz Tunder (c.1667), Matthias Weckmann (1621-74) and Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707) wrote many examples and some of their works would have been known to Bach. The texts of these cantatas were a mixture of biblical quotations and verses from hymns that would have been in many cases familiar to regular worshippers. Increasingly, new religious poetry was provided for the purpose by various

authors, notably from about 1700 by Erdmann Neumeister, a Lutheran pastor from Hamburg. Many of his texts were set to music by Bach.

Composers from the seventeenth century onwards frequently used Lutheran chorale melodies in their settings, either with straightforward four-part harmonizations for voices doubled by instruments or as a *cantus firmus* ('fixed song') in a more elaborate movement. Bach's early cantatas reveal his debt to his German predecessors, particularly in the way in which the chorales were incorporated. However, by the time he was at Leipzig, from 1723 onwards, his absorption of many of the styles and formal structures of Italian music was clear.

Circumstances of the First Performance

The first performance of Cantata No. 48, *Ich elender Mensch* took place in Leipzig on 3 October 1723, the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity. Bach had only very recently taken up his appointment as Cantor of St Thomas's Church, after holding appointments in Arnstadt, Mühlhausen, Weimar and Anhalt-Cöthen, all towns within fairly short distances of one another either in or near the states of Thuringia or Saxony in what is now eastern Germany.

The Cantor's duties at Leipzig included oversight of the music at the principal four churches in the town, St Thomas's and St Nicholas's being the main ones. However, his duties also included involvement with the musical education of the boys at St Thomas's School, where the choristers were educated, and responsibility for the provision of music on a number of civic occasions.

Bach would have had about fifty or so singers from the School at his disposal. However, these were organised into four different choirs to cover the four churches. The more able singers, from the senior classes, would be in Choirs I and II, which alternated at St Thomas's and St Nicholas's. They would perform at the lengthy services every Sunday and on Feast Days, sometimes taking the music performed at one church in the morning to the other in the evening. He also had the services of the eight members of the Town Music Company. These played various instruments, including violin, oboe, trumpet and bassoon. In addition, Bach called on others, including students, to supplement his orchestral resources and sometimes his choral resources. There was also a professional organist at each of the four churches.

The cantata had designated slots in the order of the services, the Mass in the morning and Vespers in the evening. The performers would all be situated in a gallery at the back of the church. From the general information given above, we may guess that there would be around twelve to fifteen singers, including those who would take the solo movements, and a minimum of nine or ten instrumentalists. Bach himself may have led the performance from the first violins or from the organ.

In its complete form Cantata No. 48 has seven movements, the additional three being a tenor recitative, a tenor aria and a final chorale. The melody of this chorale is the same as that which is played by the trumpet and oboes in the first movement, but at the end of the cantata it is heard sung in four parts with instruments doubling the voices. As such, this cantata has one of the typical shapes of Bach's church cantatas (Chorus - Recitative - Chorale - Aria - Recitative - Aria - Chorale). It was one of over sixty that he composed during his first year at Leipzig, a year which also included the composition of the *St. John Passion*. Even allowing for the fact that in some of these cantatas he used material from works that he had written earlier, especially at Weimar, it represents an astonishing rate of productivity. It was, however, only the first of five cycles of cantatas for the church's year that he embarked upon during his Leipzig years.

Performing Forces

First movement	Four-part choir (all male), trumpet, two oboes, violins I and II, viola, continuo (probably violone, bassoon and organ)
Second movement	Alto soloist, violins I and II, viola, continuo (probably just violone and organ)
Third movement	As first movement, but with instruments doubling voices
Fourth movement	Alto soloist, oboe solo, continuo

Pitch would have been concert A at c.415 as opposed to the modern 440 (approximately a semitone lower).

There are significant differences between authentic and modern instruments. An example is the tone of the trumpet and the two oboes respectively, which balance one another perfectly in the canon in the first movement. In addition, the small number of singers compared with modern choirs and the limited number of string players, possibly one to a part, combine to

give a chamber music quality to the performance (as can be heard on the NAM CD).

Use of Resources

Bach uses a diverse range of instruments, particularly of obbligato instruments (ie, those used for solo or other parts which cannot be omitted) in his cantatas. In Cantata No. 48, these include, in addition to the strings and (organ) continuo, a trumpet and two oboes, though these are not used in every movement.

First movement

The respective roles of the instruments and voices are well-defined:

- The trumpet has the chorale melody as used in movement VII. It begins at Bar 14, beat 3, and each phrase is played separately with gaps of several bars between. The two oboes also play this chorale, in unison with each other and in canon with the trumpet, two bars later and at the interval of a perfect fourth lower (Example 3).
- The strings have their own material, the first violin having the rising quaver figure first heard in Bar 1 which is then repeated in different forms and at different pitches throughout the movement (Example 1).
- The second violin, viola and continuo have supporting chords, mostly on the third and first beats of the bar, the continuo supporting the whole texture of the music in this rhythm, even where the upper strings are silent for a few bars.
- The singers are divided into four parts; soprano, alto, tenor and bass. These parts are sometimes used in pairs (eg. Soprano and Alto in Bars 12-21, Tenor and Bass in Bars 56-65). Whether in two or four parts, entries are always imitative.

Second movement

The strings play a sequence of slow-moving sustained chords, accompanying the alto soloist.

Third movement

The chorale is harmonized for the choir in four parts. The instruments double the vocal lines: trumpet, oboes and first violin double the soprano, second violin the alto, viola the tenor and continuo the bass.

Fourth movement

The texture is three-part; alto soloist, oboe solo and continuo.

Textures

First movement

The texture has three layers:

- The first violin melody, supported by the other strings and continuo in chordal writing (at first only on the third and first beats of the bar but on all three beats of the bar at the approach to each cadence). This layer is established in the opening orchestral ritornello and maintained by the strings throughout the movement.
- The choral parts, whether used in pairs or in four parts. The writing is always contrapuntal, with the two-part sections (Bars 12 (beat 3)-21 and 56 (beat 3)-65) being inexact canons, the second part entering two bars after the first, a fifth lower but after two bars becoming a fourth lower. The sections for four voices are always contrapuntal with much use of imitation.
- The trumpet and the two oboes, in two-part canon, as described above.

Second movement

This has a five-part texture, uses an alto solo and four-part homophonic accompaniment (resulting in recitativo stromentato).

Third movement

Four-part texture, voices doubled by instruments. The apparently chordal texture as seen in short score is misleading, as is revealed in any open score version of this (and many other of Bach's harmonisations of chorale melodies).

Fourth movement

Three part texture consisting of alto solo, oboe obbligato and continuo. However, note that the apparent thinness of the two-part sections here would be filled out by the organ continuo as the player realised the harmonies indicated by the figured bass.

Literary Text

The author of this cantata text is anonymous. However, the words of the first movement come from St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, chapter 7, verse 24. We also know the author of the words of the third movement, a verse from a hymn by Martin Rutilius. The text of each movement (as provided in NAM, p. 538) is given in the following section on Structure and Tonality.

Structure and Tonality

First movement: Chorus

Translation of text: *Unhappy man that I am; who will deliver me from this deathly body?*

There are four main sections

Section 1 Bars 1-44 (G minor, modulating to D minor at Bar 41, ending with tierce de Picardie at Bar 44, leading back to G minor for second section).

1-12 Orchestral ritornello, first violin has two-bar rising figure (perhaps suggesting part of the text: *Who will deliver me?*), repeated three times rising higher each time, before descending to cadence. [See Ex. 1]

Example 1



12-21 S and A in canon using melody line in Ex. 2.

Example 2



Ich e-len-der Mensch, wer wird mich er-lö-sen vom Lei-be die-ses To-des!

The strings have similar material to 1-12 though re-arranged.

The wind play the first phrase of the chorale melody (*Herr Jesu Christ, ich schrei zu dir*, ['Lord Jesus Christ, I cry to thee']) in canon. [See Ex. 3]

Example 3



Note the following features:

- the initial minor sixth leap on *Ich elender* ('unhappy I')
- the melismatic quaver figure on the second syllable of *erlösen* ('deliver')
- the descending intervals on *dieses Tödes* ('this deathly').

20-31 Orchestral ritornellos (as 1-12)

31-44 Four-part choir, with imitative entries in order Bass, Tenor Soprano, Alto using same theme as in two-part section above (12-21); wind instruments play the second phrase of the chorale melody (29 (beat 3)-35).

Section 2 Bars 45-88

As Bars 1-44 above, but Tenor and Bass sing instead of Soprano and Alto (57-65) and Bass and Tenor exchanged for Soprano and Alto (75-88) except for A and B in 87-88. Ends D minor without tierce de Picardie.

Section 3 Bars 88 (beat 3)-107 (beat 2)

This section begins with a re-working of the choral material. The imitative entries for SATB (Bars 88 - 94) are each a fifth lower than the previous one and the tonality of the music reflects this, moving from D minor (S entry) to G minor (A) to C minor (T) to F minor (B).

In the second part of this section (98-107 but overlapping with the preceding part to 102, where the bass finishes), there is a second set of imitative entries, in the order SATB, where in the SAT parts the initial interval of a minor sixth is widened to a minor seventh.

The wind instruments play the third phrase of their chorale (97.3-103).

Section 4 Bars 103-138 (end)

103-114: Strings ritornello (as 1-11), are overlapping with the last four bars of the previous section.

113-120: Choral entries (S with A, T, and then B). The initial interval is now widened to an octave in the STB parts. Wind plays the fourth phrase of chorale 112-118.

120-138 Final set of choral entries, in order TBSA, also adopting the tonal pattern of Bars 88-94, ie. D minor, G minor, C minor, F minor, with each new entry after the first a fifth lower (or fourth higher) than the one before. The tonality becomes C minor in Bar 131 in preparation for the final plagal cadence in G minor, with tierce de Picardie in the final chord.

Wind have fifth and final phrase of chorale Bars 126.3-130, but the canon is now at an interval of one bar only and the parts are extended to the final cadence, with trumpet having an additional part in the contrapuntal texture and the two oboes sustaining an inverted pedal on G (dominant pedal in C minor, tonic pedal in G minor).

Second movement: Recitativo

Translation: *O the pain, O the misery that torment me, as the poison of my sins courses raging through my breast and veins. This world is more and more my infirmary, my death bed; this body must carry its torments to the grave. But my soul feels most strongly the*

poison that afflicts it, so that, when pain affects this deathly body, when the cup tastes bitter to the soul, it tears from it a heavy sigh.

The structure of this movement is based on two halves, with a perfect cadence in B flat minor in Bar 8 and a perfect cadence in B flat major in Bar 15-16, both of these played by the strings alone.

It begins with a chord of E flat major but almost every bar brings a modulation, some very surprising. The fluid tonality matches the unease of the text and allows the solo line many expressively tortuous intervals.

In the first bar, the soloist falls from B flat to D flat over the E flat major chord and in Bar 2 the tonality moves to F minor. In Bar 3, this becomes C minor on the third beat, then in Bar 5 the music moves to the dominant seventh of A flat. The A flat in the bass at Bar 6 is followed by A natural in Bar 7, the leading note of B flat minor, and the first section ends with a perfect cadence in this key in Bar 8.

In Bar 9, the D natural suggests a move to E flat (major or minor) but in fact Bach moves via a diminished seventh chord, D, F, A flat, C flat (or B natural) to the dominant seventh of E major in Bar 10, the B natural being the one note in common between the two chords. Notice the leap to C sharp, the dominant ninth, in Bar 10 ('the poison that afflicts it').

The chord of E major (at the furthest remove from B flat) in Bar 11 is followed by the diminished seventh chord on A sharp with its G natural ('pain').

The tonality shifts to G minor for Bar 13 and the first half of 14. This is followed by the chord of the dominant seventh of E flat, then the diminished seventh on E natural, the sharpened fourth in B flat, just before the final cadence of the movement in B flat major.

Third movement: Chorale

Translation: *If it should be that punishment and tribulation must follow from our sins, then punish me in this world and spare me in the next and let me atone here below.*

Such a text not surprisingly spurred Bach to draw deeply on his vocabulary of chromatic harmony.

Notice the unexpected D flat in the bass at Bar 2 beat 1, with a chord that treats the G in the melody as a passing note (*punishment*) and the extended plagal cadence (*atone*). Students of Bach's harmony would find it rewarding to compare this harmonization with the more straightforward version in Riemenschneider (No 40).

Fourth movement: Aria

Trans: *Ah, if it should be your will, destroy this Sodom, this sinful body. Spare only the soul and purify it, that it might become your holy Sion.*

The form of this aria is abbreviated *da capo*. In this case, the expected repeat of the first section is limited to the opening solo oboe ritornello. The key is E flat major.

1-16 Oboe ritornello (8 bars ending with imperfect cadence, a further 8 bars with perfect cadence); there are brief passing modulations to A flat major (3-4), B flat major (10 beats 1-2), C minor (10.3-12.2) and B flat major (13-14).

17-38 **Section A**
Alto solo with oboe obbligato, beginning as before for four bars but proceeding differently, passing through F minor (21-22), B flat major (27-28), F minor (30-32.2) and B flat minor (34-37) but finishing with a cadence in B flat major (38).

39-48 Oboe ritornello, shortened version, in B flat major.

48-79 **Section B**
This consist of an Alto solo with oboe obbligato. The rhythmic patterns are similar to section A but the melodic shapes are different. The music passes through:

- C minor (49-50)
- E flat major (51-52)
- A flat major (53-56).

There is then a four-bar passage for oboe and continuo only, beginning in A flat but ending in F minor. This uses the melody from the opening ritornello.

The alto enters again at Bar 60 with the theme from the beginning of section B but with the initial leap of a minor third extended to a minor seventh. This begins in F minor but returns to E flat major at Bar 63.

- F minor appears again at 68
- A flat major at 72
- B flat major at 74
- E flat major at 76, leading to the final perfect cadence of this section at 78-79.

From Bar 65, the oboe begins a restatement of its original ritornello theme, but this has to be adapted from 69 to 75 to fit with the alto and continuo parts.

The opening sixteen-bar oboe ritornello is then repeated in its original form, ending at the Fine.

Harmony

Bach's harmonic style in this cantata is often chromatic and is sometimes linked to a fast-modulating tonal structure. Much of the chromaticism derives from fairly frequent use of diminished seventh chords, based either on the leading note or on the leading note of the dominant. Examples of both of these may be seen in the very first four bars of the first movement (2 [beat 1] and 3 [beat 3]).

Examples of modulations which produce false relations can be seen in the following four bars (4 [beat 3]-5 [beat 1] and 6 [beat 3]-7 [beat 1]).

The use of appoggiaturas also heightens harmonic interest, as can be seen in this same passage at 6 [beat 1] and 8 [beat 1].

All of these devices are employed to serve the purpose of bringing intense musical expression to the setting of the words, both in terms of the general mood of a given text and also at times the particular meaning of individual words. Notice how the text of the recitative is underlined by unexpected harmonic progressions.

Beyond these details, however, there is also a secure grasp of functional harmony, defining

phrase and structure. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in Bars 8 [beat 3]-12 of the first movement. After the four rising phrases of Bars 1-8, with their disturbingly unsettled harmonies, the opening ritornello is brought to an almost stately conclusion by four falling bars in which the earlier quaver patterns are extended to two bars of continuous quavers and the chord progressions become more continuous and more logical, leading to the expected cadence in the tonic key.

Use the chorale to gain insight into Bach's harmonic methods with regard to:

- Suspensions
- Falling leading notes at cadences
- Use of seventh chords in root position and inversions

Melody

Much has already been said about the melodic aspects of these four movements. It will be obvious that in addition to his use of the two pre-existing chorale melodies, Bach has been generous in his melodic invention. In the first movement, the two apparently contrasted melodic motifs (the first violin Bars 1-2 and the choral motif, with its leap of a minor sixth) may be more closely linked than they seem at first sight or hearing. The four quavers in Bar 1 describe the interval of a sixth, the same interval that characterises the opening of the soprano entry [See Examples 1 and 2].

However, the use of these two motifs is different. The first is repeated in its melodic shape but transposed, first up a fifth, then up by further steps and in an adapted form. The choral motif on the other hand, also a two-bar motif, is extended into a seven-bar melody setting the whole of the verse on which this movement is based. The two motifs are never exchanged between voices and instruments.

We have noted previously the way in which the minor sixth of the choral motif is widened, first to a minor seventh and then to an octave. This seemingly small melodic device has an important structural effect in this movement.

In the second movement, the character of the melody, as with the rhythm, is very much dictated by the recitative style. There is greater fragmentation here, reflecting the phrasing of the words, and the rise and fall of the melodic line is influenced by patterns of speech.

The melody of the third movement – the chorale – was not of course by Bach as it had been in use for centuries. As with many chorales, it moves largely by step.

In the **fourth movement**, the vocal writing reverts to a more song-like character. Though the line is in general more lyrical than that of the second movement, there are nonetheless unexpected notes and intervals that colour the music in line with the meaning of the words, eg. Bars 20-21 and the G flat in 27. In this case, the melody is one that both voice and oboe can share, though when both are sounding at the same time they are of course in counterpoint with one another.

Rhythm

In common with much baroque music, it is primarily the rhythm of the bass line that gives character to the music. In the first movement, as we have seen, the bass line mainly moves from the third crotchet of the bar to the first crotchet in the next bar. This is the element that links the three layers of the music, being established first as a chordal accompaniment to the violin melody at the opening and then providing definition to the harmonic structure of the otherwise very contrapuntal choral passages. It is also a defining feature of the chorale melody played by the wind instruments, though here minims are used instead of crotchets followed by crotchet rests on the first and second beats of the bar.

The regular rhythmic pattern of the continuo part as described above is broken by the continuous crotchet movement at the end of the opening ritornello, Bars 9-12, and wherever that is repeated in the movement. However, it is maintained even when the upper strings are silent, the continuo then fulfilling its role as support to the choral parts. The only exception to this is the passage from 114-120, where the continuo has a pedal note, first on D, then on A after moving down the scale by step. Notice the hemiola rhythms at Bars 42-43, where Bach gives the impression of a change of pulse from 3/4 to 3/2.

In the second movement, the rhythm is almost entirely dictated by the natural speech rhythm of the text. The instruments must simply wait for the voice.

The third movement, in simple quadruple time, and drawing mainly on crotchets and quavers, typically uses pause signs to mark the ends of the phrases, though these have no impact on the rhythmic flow of the music (listen to the NAM recording).

In the fourth movement, the continuo line has an uninterrupted succession of quavers in 3/8 time. All the rhythmic interest is in the alto solo and oboe solo parts. In these, there is great variety in rhythmic patterns, with the dotted quaver-semiquaver-quaver figure of Bar 1 occurring in many later phrases. Where both voice and oboe are used simultaneously, there is considerable counterpoint of rhythm, especially in the later bars of section B, from Bar 66 to Bar 79.

Bibliography

If you wish to find out more about Bach and his music, refer to the following:

- W. Gillies Whittaker, *The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach* (Oxford, 1981)
- Peter Williams, *J. S. Bach: A Life in Music* (Cambridge, 2007)
- Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (Oxford 2000)
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