

# **ALEC ROTH – FINZI SCHOLARSHIP 2015**

## **A BACH PILGRIMAGE TO INSPIRE NEW WORK**

### **PROJECT REPORT**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Music's power to nourish us individually and bind us socially is wonderfully manifest in the cantatas of J S Bach. The texts deal with subject matter of significance to the audience, the music shapes and interprets the text, and also acts as metaphor – for example, in the deployment of the solo voice as individual, and the choir as community.

As a composer, the cantata is a musical form that I would like to explore further, as I feel it has potential for development here and now. But how to proceed? A period of residency in Leipzig, studying and attending performances of Bach's music seemed to me to be an ideal way, and my Finzi Scholarship project was designed to that end. The purpose was not an academic study, but rather to act as a stimulus to my thinking and to inspire new creative work.

#### **ORIGINAL AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The following activities were envisaged:

- (1) An intensive period of study at the library of the Leipzig Bach-Archiv, to examine scores, recordings, and other material related to Bach's cantatas.
- (2) Experiencing the living tradition of weekly cantata performances by Bach's own choir (*Thomanerchor*), at St Thomas's Church (*Thomaskirche*), in their appropriate liturgical context.
- (3) Attending concert performances of Bach Cantatas by other choirs and in other venues, including the 'Bach in the Box' cantata series at the Leipzig Conservatoire (*Hochschule für Musik und Theater*).
- (4) Visits to other centres, for example, the Göttingen Bach Institute and the Bach Birthplace Museum in Eisenach.
- (5) Investigating other musical organisations in Leipzig, such as the MDR Radio Choir, Gewandhaus, Opera and other choirs and vocal groups.
- (6) Visits to libraries in the search for suitable subject matter and texts for use in setting to music in cantata form.
- (7) Some time set aside for reflection, and also perhaps some creative work – devising text sequences or sketching musical ideas, for example.

#### **THE PROJECT REALIZED**

My original proposal was for a twelve-week residency in Leipzig. The award of the Finzi Scholarship was made to fund my transport and other related costs for a four-week stay. In the event, I decided to supplement the award from my savings in order to extend my visit. This enabled me to undertake the project in Leipzig over ten weeks from 20 December 2015 to 27 February 2016.

## **PRELIMINARY ACTIVITIES**

Before undertaking the project itself, the following preparatory activities proved to be very valuable:

(1) A preliminary trip to Germany in March 2015 to attend an intensive German language course at the Goethe Institute in Göttingen, followed by a week in Leipzig to make contacts and help me plan the logistical arrangements for the project.

(2) Attendance as an observer at the St Andrews University Choral Summer School, August 2015. The week-long cantata course for singers was led by Bach expert, John Butt, and included lectures, rehearsals and performances. It also introduced me to Professor Butt's writings, in particular his thought-provoking book 'Bach's Dialogue with Modernity'.

(3) Working on the principle that a good way to learn about something is to teach it, I led a course of eight weekly evening classes for the general public at Malvern Library in the autumn of 2015, covering the six cantatas which comprise Bach's Christmas Oratorio. The discipline of preparing the weekly classes was very useful in getting me into a suitable frame of mind for the residency.

## **RESIDENCY IN LEIPZIG**

20 December 2015 to 27 February 2016

The core of my work lay in the surveying of as many of the cantatas as I could in the time available. To do so in depth meant that I had to be selective, so I decided to concentrate on Bach's early cantatas (composed during his periods of employment in Mühlhausen and Weimar), and those of the first annual cycle of his post as Director of Music at St Thomas's. I was particularly interested to follow Bach's progress through this first Leipzig year, when he set himself the awesome task of composing a new cantata for performance every Sunday. How do the cantatas reflect the seasons of the church and civic year? How do they relate to each other? How did the pressures of such a prodigious workload affect the nature of the works themselves?

During my stay I managed a study of some 90 cantatas.

## **STUDYING THE CANTATAS AT THE BACH-ARCHIV**

The library of the Leipzig Bach-Archiv became the base for my project. Situated on the third floor of the Archiv, the library proved a perfect place to work. My desk faced a window looking out over the Thomaskirchhof towards the church opposite, and if occasionally my eyes wandered down to the square below, the stern gaze of the Bach statue seemed to say 'Stop daydreaming and get on with your work!'. (One of the great joys of this project has been the opportunity for a little daydreaming.) The comprehensive resources that the library affords meant that in addition to familiarisation with the music through listening to recordings and study of the scores, I was able to follow up particular features which interested me through the wide-ranging collection of commentaries and background material on Bach and his music. My task was made all the more congenial thanks to the unfailingly friendly and resourceful help provided by the library and research staff.

## **EXPERIENCING BACH'S WORK IN ITS LITURGICAL CONTEXT**

Just across the square from the Bach Archiv is the Thomaskirche, where Bach worked from his appointment as Cantor in 1723 until his death in 1750, and where the weekly performance of a cantata by the modern descendants of his choir – the Thomanerchor, is a living tradition today. For me, having only ever heard his cantatas in concert performance, experiencing them in the proper liturgical setting of a Lutheran church service was a very important step in my understanding and appreciation of these works, and I made a point of attending as many musical services as possible during my stay.

I had deliberately planned my arrival in Leipzig for just before Christmas. I was familiar with Bach's 'Christmas Oratorio', but only from concert performances, and so I was keen to hear the music as it was originally intended, with the six constituent cantatas performed individually at different services on the six festival days over the Christmas season.

To find myself sitting in the congregation at St Thomas's at the 9:30 am service on Christmas Day was the fulfilment of a long-cherished dream, so hearing the first Christmas Oratorio cantata '*Jauchzet, frohlocket*' performed by the Thomanerchor accompanied by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra was an overwhelming emotional as well as a fascinating musical experience.

The context of the service – the reading of the Gospel text for the day, the content and placing of the prayers, the central importance of the sermon, the key role of the organ, the congregation singing of chorales (hymns) – was a revelation: suddenly I was hearing what I had previously known only as a concert item in a completely new light. Bach's cantata was revealed as a brilliant summation, providing the intellectual, emotional, spiritual and musical heart of the whole service. This experience (and the many other services which I attended in the Thomaskirche) was to inform my approach to the study of the cantatas over the following weeks.

## **SERENDIPITY**

Before I left for Leipzig, I was describing my project to a friend, who responded "but if the core of your activity is listening to and studying the scores of the cantatas, surely you could do that at home". To a certain extent that is true, but such an approach comes nowhere near the experience of encountering the living performance tradition as outlined above, and it certainly would have precluded some of the most valuable and enriching facets of the project – the chance discoveries and meetings, new Bach friends (performers, scholars, students, audience members), concerts and informal music-making (the street music of the Leipzig buskers during the Christmas festival period – including a surprising amount of music by Bach – was a study in itself). My stay in Leipzig was full of such serendipitous encounters; as an example, one particularly thought-provoking instance will suffice:

One morning in January on my way to the library my curiosity was aroused by the sight of a number of radio and TV broadcast vans outside St Thomas's. The church was packed for the funeral service of the world-renowned conductor Kurt Masur, who had been music director (*Kapellmeister*) of the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra for 27 years 1970-1996. Although long resident in the United States, where he had been music director of the New York Philharmonic, his wish was to be buried in Leipzig. I was fortunate to find a seat high up in the gallery from where the Thomanerchor and Gewandhausorchester provided the music for the service, culminating in the 'Dona Nobis Pacem' from Bach's B minor Mass. The service, which was relayed on speakers outside the church and broadcast live on television and radio, included two funeral orations, the first from the resident pastor, and the second from the leader of the city council, since Masur is regarded in Leipzig as a civic hero as well as a musical one, for his pivotal role in the 'peaceful revolution' of October 1989.

The service gave me much food for thought, reminding me that Bach was employed by the city of Leipzig, and providing music for civic occasions was an important part of his work. His music contains a rich creative interplay between the sacred and the secular, and his cantatas were to be heard not only in Leipzig's churches, but also at that popular focus of the city's intellectual and social life, Zimmermann's Coffee House.

### **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**

In addition to my core study of the cantatas, I did manage to include some of my other original aims and objectives (see page 1). For example, a day-trip to Eisenach to visit the Bach Birthplace Museum proved not only entertaining and instructive but included a couple of experiences which stimulated my musical imagination: In the Museum itself I found particularly interesting an audio-visual display of modern interpretations of Bach's music through dance, drama, and creative music-making. After lunch I decided to take a walk up to the Wartburg (the huge hill-top castle which dominates the skyline so dramatically). I arrived at the top just as it started to snow, and the panoramic view over the seemingly endless Thuringian Forest proved particularly memorable and inspiring.

It was also inspiring to get to know Leipzig's extraordinarily rich choral scene. The city boasts two large full-time professional choirs – at the Opera House and the radio/TV station (MDR); the Gewandhaus Orchestra's own choir; outstanding children's choirs at the Opera, MDR and Gewandhaus; and numerous smaller choirs both professional and amateur. Particularly memorable were the 73-strong MDR Choir in two concerts of Arvo Pärt's music in the Peterskirche; and the sound (and sight – fully costumed) of the 70-strong Opera House Chorus singing Poulenc's fiendishly difficult *Figure Humaine* as the accompaniment to a modern ballet. I also had a memorable day-trip to Berlin for a choral festival to hear the National Youth Chamber Choir (*Deutscher Jugendkammerchor*) performing in an imaginative multimedia presentation.

I didn't have much time left to pursue my search for suitable texts to set to music, although visits to the Leipzig City Library (*Stadtbibliothek*) and the German National Library (*Deutsche Nationalbibliothek*) did introduce me to several writers (including Jochen Klepper and Cäsar Flaischlen, for example) whose work I intend to investigate further.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

Before I left for Leipzig someone rather unkindly reminded me of the old adage that all composers have a little imp sitting on their shoulder, who, from time to time whispers gleefully in their ear: "You'll never be as good as Bach". Indeed, faced with the almost unfathomable nature of Bach's achievement, the first reaction is to throw up one's hands in despair and give up any thought of even considering composing a cantata of one's own. But as the days went on any sense of hopelessness turned to inspiration and challenge, as I became infected by Bach's generosity and inventiveness, and the qualities of deep humanity and compassion which for me shine through in his music like no other. And so when I looked down at the statue in the square below, it now seemed to be saying: "I did what I had to do in my time and place; you must return to yours and just do the best you can . . . and stop daydreaming and get on with your work!".

So what do I do now?

Well, for one thing I shall be continuing the study process, examining the remaining cantatas, albeit at a very much slower rate. At present I am working my way through the 'chorale' cantatas of Bach's second Leipzig cycle (1724-5).

But the main purpose of my project is to inspire new work of my own – how might that happen?

The Leipzig experience has given me much food for thought – and the food is of an extraordinary richness, so I suspect that a long digestion period is needed. In the immediate aftermath of the project, the full implications are not clear, but I already have some thoughts, and even some musical ideas bubbling around in my head. The Leipzig visit proved a formative experience in that I came away not with answers or conclusions, but, much more valuably, with some important questions that I want to address when I come to consider my own creative work:

## **CONNECTING WITH A CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCE?**

Bach's cantatas are performed today more than they ever were in his lifetime. What is it about them that appeals to modern audiences? Most likely not the words, which are often problematic in our secular, multicultural age. One of the cantatas performed at St Thomas's during my stay was BWV126, whose opening chorus begins with the exhortation: "Uphold us, Lord, by your word, and ward off the murderous Pope and Turks" (apparently from a children's song composed by Luther himself). Naturally I was quite curious to see how this was going to be dealt with in performance, and was not too surprised to hear the choir offer a

different version with bowdlerised words. However, the original text was printed in the service sheet, and the pastor boldly took the words as the text for his sermon, producing an interesting response from the congregation, beginning with laughter and progressing to a subdued and thoughtful silence, for he linked the theme to the current refugee crisis which was then at its height in Germany, and formed the lead item in every news bulletin.

### **SUBJECT MATTER?**

Of course, if we are truly to understand and appreciate Bach's work, we must have a proper sensitivity to the cultural context in which it was created. But equally, as a composer I must have a keen awareness of my own time and place. How can I find subject matter and texts which will be meaningful for a secular and diverse audience today?

Following Bach's progress through the first year's cycle of his Leipzig cantatas makes it clear how the feast days of the Christian year fit in to the natural progression of the seasons. So many of us now live in towns and cities, and have become detached from these rhythms of the natural world – the natural world of which we are but part, but which is now under threat from human exploitation and despoliation. No shortage of big themes there. Or how about the timeless and universal aspects of human existence – birth, death, love, hate, joy, sorrow – no shortage there, either.

The thing I take away from my study of Bach, however, is not so much his choice of themes (which anyway were largely prescribed by the Lutheran liturgy), as his treatment of them. To an audience of today many of the texts he set may seem obsessively concerned with sin, death, the devil, judgement, and in the texts influenced by the Pietist movement which was fashionable at that time, even strangely sentimental. But no matter how unpromising the text, he always finds a way to connect us – often by honing in on a particular idea, phrase or word, allowing his fantastically vivid imagination to take flight and create music that transcends the text and carries us on to a higher plane. And more often than not he does this by humanising whatever theme or idea is concerned, so that we are connected to it in a direct and deeply affecting way, moving beyond the narrow theological confines of its source. This method of taking ideas from the text to seed musical ideas, which can then sustain a whole aria or chorus is one I'm keen to explore.

### **FINDING THE WORDS?**

A key element in Bach's compositional practice is his creative response to the text. But I now realise that his creativity operates at an even earlier stage – in the selection and arrangement of the words themselves. The texts of most of the cantatas are composite, assembled from a variety of sources, some of which are pre-existing – hymns, prayers, bible passages, devotional poems, etc. Some are largely the work of a single author – and Bach availed himself of such texts published in contemporary collections. He also worked collaboratively with

various writers (the most well-known being Picander), who might produce the whole text or provide new words to bridge the gaps in an assembly of diversely-sourced material, or even provide a new text for an existing piece of Bach's music borrowed from an earlier work (even from a secular one). It now seems clear to me that Bach's compositional sensibility can often be seen in the assembly and structuring of these composite texts – in his occasional use of overarching symmetrical or palindromic structures, for example. I already have a little experience of assembling a composite text myself, in a recent large-scale choral work, *A Time to Dance*; studying Bach's approach to this has confirmed my feeling that the use of composite texts is something I wish to pursue, and has given me new thoughts about how I might go about it.

### **MUSIC AS COMMUNITY?**

There is so much division and conflict in today's world, and so many currents of modern society seem designed to separate us from each other – the iPod/headphones listening experience is one small example (if commercial forces can isolate us, then they can sell us one each). But music is a powerful means of bringing us together. Can the choir/orchestra be a metaphor for a community in balance with itself and with its constituent members? Bach's example is wonderful in his juxtaposition of the individual (solo voice/instrument) against the group (choir/orchestra). Listening to the elegant balance of musical forces in his cantatas, and to the ingenious interplay in the complex textures of his music (the separate voices each having something to say, various yet complementary, and then sometimes sounding together in perfect harmony) reminds us that a healthy society is woven together from the interplay of shared ideals (a core principle of all great religious or secular traditions). The sound of his music is somehow inviting, and the techniques he employs encourage a creative response from the listener, at the same time drawing the audience collectively into the music, so becoming an active part of the communal experience. Achieving something similar for a modern audience is a huge challenge – not least because one of Bach's most powerful tools is not available to us – the binding use of chorale melodies.

### **USE OF THE CHORALE?**

Bach's use of well-known hymn-tunes (chorales), both directly and in different guises, connected his audience to the music in a powerful way, for even though they did not join in singing during the performance of a cantata, just hearing the melody would strike a chord. It would also bring to mind the words usually sung to that tune, whereas Bach might be using different words – enabling him to play with the congregation's expectations. But in my here-and-now, the decline of church-going, the disappearance of daily hymn-singing from school assemblies, the secularisation of our society and the need to recognise its multicultural, multi-faith and atheist components, have led to a culture which is fragmented musically as well as in other ways. And so this powerful technique of connecting with an audience is simply not available to a composer today. Or is it? Some

have tried (Michael Tippett's use of American spirituals in his oratorio *A Child of Our Time* is a good example). Perhaps I'll have a go, but how?

### **VOICES AND INSTRUMENTS?**

Bach's vocal writing is often technically very difficult (he admitted as much himself), but when questioned, singers today usually reply, "Yes, it is hugely challenging, but hugely rewarding too". I now think that one of the reasons for this is the dynamic relationship between Bach's instrumental and vocal writing (both solo and group).

For example, the opening section or *ritornello* of many arias is allocated to a solo (*obbligato*) instrument, which will begin with musical material clearly derived from the words of the text being set, and indeed which the voice will sing to those words when it enters. However, the instrumental solo, although starting with the vocal material, will often go on to develop its melodic line in a fashion which is more instrumental in character, with wide leaps, arpeggiated passages etc., which the voice would find ungainly, difficult, or even impossible. It is as though the instrument is taking the thought or idea from the text and then using the particular characteristics and possibilities of its playing style to take those thoughts or ideas beyond what can be expressed by the human voice, as though we are hearing that which animates the singer but which the human voice is itself incapable of expressing. I find such ideas very exciting. How might I develop vocal/instrumental relationships in my own music?

### **DANCE?**

One reason I often prefer to attend rehearsals rather than concerts of Bach is that I can get up and move around, as the dance impulse in his music affects me so strongly. It is indeed extraordinary that even in the most tragic and grief-stricken sections of the cantatas (as in the Passions) the music is often still dancing, albeit in a deeply moving way. Studying the cantatas has given me more insights into how he achieves this. The spirit of dance is a fundamental driving force in my own music, but I think I can learn a lot from Bach about how I might develop its reach and effectiveness.

### **WIT, WORDPLAY, SYMBOL, METAPHOR?**

I have to confess to taking a delight in occasionally peppering my music with signs and symbols, tricks and teases, musical puns and paradoxes. I try to keep these indulgencies well hidden, for they might easily be misunderstood and regarded as a lack of seriousness, whereas they are simply a by-product of the element of play which forms an essential stage in the creative process.

So it was wonderful for me to discover that Bach not only indulged in such shenanigans, but was clearly grand-master status. In the early cantatas in particular, the wonderful musical wit is often enhanced by instances of punning, wordplay, imagery, and metaphor, some of it audible, some concealed below the surface of the music, and sometimes only perceivable in the musical notation of



the score (from graphical representations of snakes and ladders to symbolic representations of the cross). I'm not only feeling less guilty about my own indulgence in such practices, but inspired to try and take my game up a level, for Bach is not only a master of wit, but also wisdom, as he shows how such creativity can enhance the music with humour, but also with surprise, wonder, thoughtfulness, and deep seriousness.

### **WHAT NOW?**

One completely unexpected outcome of this project is that I have returned from Leipzig with the offer of a commission. Some time ago a friend had given me a CD by a Leipzig-based vocal group, which had very much impressed me, so when I arrived in the city, I decided to check out their website. I was delighted to discover that they were giving a concert during my stay. I duly attended, and after the highly impressive performance, made contact and, as tends to happen to composers, discovered that I just happened to have a CD of my music with me, which I duly handed over. A subsequent exploratory meeting led to the offer of a commission, which I was delighted to accept, not least since it seemed a heaven-sent opportunity to put into practice some of the lessons I have learned during my ten weeks in Leipzig. Since the commission is for an *a capella* (unaccompanied voices) group, the new work will, strictly speaking, not be a cantata in the Bachian sense of using both voices and instruments, but that doesn't bother me, as my Bach studies are going to have a much wider application in my creative work:

My desire to compose new works using the cantata form as a model has certainly been encouraged by this project (a sequence of twelve monthly 'Civic Cantatas' is my current daydream). However, it is now clear to me that my studies in Leipzig will not only feed my cantata ambitions, but will have wider and deeper repercussions, affecting my whole compositional outlook. In terms of practical outcomes I fully expect that the experiences garnered during the course of this project will inform, stimulate and nourish all my creative work for the foreseeable future.

### **THANKS**

For someone pursuing the precarious hand-to-mouth existence of a freelance composer, opportunities to pause and take stock in the way that this project has allowed me to do are exceedingly rare. So my heartfelt thanks are due to the Finzi Trust for the award of the Scholarship, and to the staff of the Bach-Archiv and all my new friends and colleagues in Leipzig, who made my visit not only so fruitful and worthwhile, but also wonderfully enjoyable.

Alec Roth  
Malvern  
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