

Magnificat

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750)

Magnificat anima mea
Et exultavit spiritus meus
Quia respexit humilitatem
Omnes generationem
Quia fecit mihi magna
Et misericordia
Fecit potentiam
Deposuit potentes
Esurientes implevit bonis
Suscepit Israel
Sicut locutus est
Gloria Patri

In May 1723 Bach was appointed *Kantor* of St Thomas, Leipzig - we would probably call him the Director of Music - where he remained until his death in 1750. It was a hugely demanding post, involving teaching at the church school, playing the organ, training the choir and composing the music for the city's two principal Lutheran churches as well as supervising and training the musicians at three others. Despite this enormous workload and recurrent disputes with the city authorities, Bach composed some of his greatest music during this period. His choral compositions alone include such towering masterpieces as the *St John* and *St Matthew Passions*, the *Magnificat* and the *Mass in B minor*, as well as the *Christmas Oratorio* and some 250 church cantatas.

The Magnificat - the canticle of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Luke I: 46-55) - traditionally formed part of the ancient Roman Catholic service of Vespers. After the Reformation it was incorporated into the evening services of the Lutheran and Anglican churches, in which it was linked with the Nunc Dimittis. The Magnificat has been set to music more often than any liturgical text other than the Mass itself, in settings that vary enormously in style, from the purity of Palestrina's exquisite four-part unaccompanied compositions to Monteverdi's grand, dramatic settings written for St Mark's, Venice, and later the almost symphonic conception of Mozart's *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore*, of which the Magnificat forms the final movement, composed in 1780 for use in Salzburg Cathedral.

Bach's *Magnificat* was written in Leipzig for the 1723 Christmas Vespers. This original version was in E-flat and included several additional Christmas texts inserted at various points in the piece. Some years later he revised it, removing the Christmas interpolations to make the piece suitable for use throughout the year and transposing it into D, a much brighter key and more satisfactory for the trumpets in particular.

The extraordinary impact of Bach's great choral works derives essentially from his remarkable ability to balance, yet at the same time to exploit to the full, the spiritual and dramatic elements of each text, whether it be one as concise as the *Magnificat* or as monumental as the *St Matthew Passion*.

The *Magnificat* is conceived on a grand scale, requiring five soloists, a five-part choir and, for its time, an unusually large orchestra consisting of two flutes, two oboes, three trumpets, timpani, strings and continuo. In its splendour and jubilation the piece anticipates the great choruses of the later *Mass in B minor*. It begins with a brilliant orchestral introduction in which the trumpets feature prominently. This leads directly into an equally impressive chorus, 'Magnificat anima mea Dominum' (My soul doth magnify the Lord). The ten verses and Gloria that comprise the *Magnificat* canticle form a continuous and homogenous whole, in contrast with the libretto of an oratorio or Passion with its wide variety of extracts from many different Biblical and poetical sources. For this reason there are no recitatives in the *Magnificat*. Instead, each verse receives extended treatment, the chorus supplying appropriate emphasis to sections such as 'Fecit potentiam in brachio suo' (He hath showed strength with his arm), while the more reflective verses are assigned to the soloists. In the trio, 'Suscepit Israel' (He hath holpen his servant Israel), Bach gives the oboes a plainsong melody traditionally associated with the *Magnificat*. It appears as a *cantus firmus*, that is, a melody in greatly extended notes, against which the three soloists weave decorative vocal lines. For the final verse, 'Sicut erat in principio Amen' (As it was in the beginning Amen), Bach appropriately mirrors the words by recalling the music that was heard 'as it was in the beginning', the *Magnificat* therefore ending as exuberantly and dramatically as it began.

programme notes by John Bawden

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