

Bach's Christmas Oratorio:

Oratorio? Original? Regardless—A Masterpiece

J.S. Bach's Christmas Oratorio ranks among his finest large-scale choral works. In order to understand this complex work, one must examine its genre, composition, and meaning.

Although nearly every one of its movements makes for fascinating analysis, in this paper, I shall concentrate on the opening chorus. I shall also address the so-called "parody problem" of the Oratorio, which stems from evidence that most of the work was based on earlier compositions.

What is the genre of Bach's Christmas Oratorio? This may seem like asking, "Who is buried in Grant's tomb?", but in many ways Bach's work has little to do with then-contemporary notions of "oratorio." The earliest oratorios appeared in Italy during the 17th century, the term coming from the "oratory," a building provided for prayer and song outside of the liturgy, in which early oratorios were often performed.¹ The oratorio eventually developed into "a musical setting of a sacred, narrative-dramatic text based on a biblical story...or some other spiritual subject" in the style of opera.² Indeed, the only element distinguishing the oratorio from early opera (other than its sacred subject, and, occasionally, narration) was that it was unstaged. In Protestant Germany, the tradition of the *historia* (that is, sung Biblical "histories" or "stories"³) merged Italian-style oratorio (fostered especially in Hamburg, where operatic tastes highly influenced oratorio writing⁴) to create a new type of oratorio in the early 18th century that integrated operatic style with Biblical narrative. Bach's Christmas "Oratorio," on the other hand,

¹ For a detailed examination of the history of early oratorio, see Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, Volume I (Chapell Hill, 1977)

² Ibid, 4.

³ Smither Vol. II, 3-4.

⁴ Ibid, 107-108.

is much less dramatic than oratorios of his day; furthermore, its six sections are constructed as cantatas, each intended to be played on a different day of the Christmas season.

If each part of Bach's "oratorio" is a separate cantata, can one call it an oratorio? While the six parts *are* cast as church cantatas meant to be performed over 13 days, Bach clearly envisaged the work as a whole; the six parts are unified by narration, form, and key: First, they each are narrated by the "Evangelista", who quotes the story of the nativity from Luke and Matthew, often departing from the standard biblical passage for the day in order to achieve narrative and dramatic unity (for example, the reading for the first day of Christmas is spread out over the first two parts, so as to devote the second part entirely to the story of the shepherds). Second, all of the six parts use operatic-style arias, recitatives, and choruses to proclaim and comment on the biblical text, often with a symmetric form. For example, the first, third, and sixth parts each begin and end with a large chorus scored for trumpet and drums. Scholars have also observed that the fourth and sixth parts have extremely symmetrical internal structures⁵. Additionally, the first and last chorales sung in the Oratorio are both settings of the chorale tune "Herzlich tut mich verlangen," adding further structural unity.⁶ Finally, the six parts progress by key as D-G-D-F-A-D, focusing on the triumphant key of D (and its characteristic use of trumpets and drums) in a symmetrical structure. Only the fourth part, with its more distant key of F major, departs from the primacy of D major; it acts like the middle section of a *da capo* aria, before the jubilant recapitulation of D major in the sixth part. Furthermore, as André Pirro points out, "this work is an entirety in spirit, and the continuity of style is produced by the continuity of feeling"⁷; an overall spirit of joy pervades each of the six parts. All of these unifying

⁵ Robin A. Leaver, "The mature vocal works and their theological and liturgical context," *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, Ed. John Butt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 86-122, 97.

⁶ Ibid, 98. The chorale was often but not exclusively associated with the Passion; it appears several times in Bach's St. Matthew Passion, and thus some argue that its prominence in the Christmas Oratorio highlights the connection between Christmas and Easter.

⁷ André Pirro, *J.S. Bach*, Trans. Mervyn Savill (New York: The Orion Press, Inc., 1957), 161.

characteristics—not to mention Bach’s own use of the term “oratorio” to refer to the work, and the printing of the entire libretto prior to its performance⁸—justify calling the work an “oratorio” even if this appellation departs from the standard meaning of the term in Bach’s time.

Why did Bach compose the Oratorio? It was usual for Leipzig’s main churches to include a great deal of music in services during the Christmas season; for example, during Bach’s first year as Cantor and Musical Director, he “composed or revised...the first version of the Magnificat (BWV 243a), a Sanctus (BWV 238), and six cantatas (BWV 63, 40, 64, 190, 153 and 65).”⁹ Bach compiled the Oratorio we know today in 1734—replacing the previously unrelated cantatas used for the Christmas season. Perhaps he was inspired by the example of Dietrich Buxtehude’s *Abendmusiken*, for which he had traveled 260 miles from Arnstadt to Lübeck on foot to attend as a young man in 1705 (indeed, the *Abendmusiken* were organized into five parts spread over several days, not unlike the six cantata parts of Bach’s oratorio¹⁰). It has also been speculated that Gottfried Lange, a powerful man in Leipzig and a supporter of Bach’s, suggested or commissioned the work.¹¹ Likewise, Johann Adolf Hasse, a friend of Bach’s, had recently written several oratorios in Dresden, and “may have prompted Bach to write one of his own to curry favor with the King.”¹² Bach may have also seen writing an oratorio as a challenge, as it was a musical genre he had not yet attempted (not counting the Passions, which are somewhat oratorio-like in nature).

⁸ Smither Vol II, 158.

⁹ Leaver, 92.

¹⁰ Smither Vol II, 158.

¹¹ Ulrich Siegele, “Bach and the domestic politics of Electoral Saxony”, *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, 17-34, 31.

¹² William Gillies Whittaker, *The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach: Sacred and Secular*, Volume II (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 621. We shall examine later why Bach was particularly interested in the Dresden court.

Bach's Christmas Oratorio was heard in December of 1734 and January of 1735, with performances alternating between St. Thomas and St. Nicholas, as was the custom in Leipzig. What did the congregation hear on that first Christmas day in 1734? The first movement (like many in the Oratorio) is richly scored for three trumpets, tympani, two transverse flutes, two oboes, first and second violins, violas, and continuo, in addition to a four-part choir. Such festive instrumentation was normally reserved for special occasions; trumpets and drums, associated with royalty, emphasize the "kingship" of Christ, the Son of God and King of the Jews. (We shall examine later how this "kingship" relates to the secular kingship of the Saxon Elector.)

The first movement begins with a stunning tympani solo, unique among Bach's sacred works, which is followed immediately by a flourish in the flutes. In these first three measures, Bach introduces the two main motivic themes that run throughout the movement. The tympani's line (D-D-D-D-A) anticipates the chorus' unison entry at measure 33 with the words "Jauchzet, frohlocket!" ("Rejoice, exult!"); likewise, the flute's upward flourish is later taken up by the choir at measure 50 to the words "Lasset das Sagen" ("Set aside fear"). After another interchange at measures 3 and 4, this time between the tympani and oboes, the strings begin a jubilant run downward, as the entire orchestra joins in, with the exception of the trumpets, which execute glorious fanfares. The effect is breathtaking, artfully constructed like an elaborate Baroque ceiling.

Various groups of instruments develop the "Jauchzet" theme: first the winds, then the trumpets, followed by the strings, and finally the entire orchestra (measures 9-16). Beginning in measure 13, the bass line begins a driving motor rhythm-like sixteenth note pattern that continues through most of the movement, as if driving the congregation to rejoice. The strings

and winds introduce a new motive at measure 17, which will appear later at measure 65 on the line “verbannet die Klage” (“banish lamentation”); they further develop the theme in syncopation through measure 24.

More trumpet fanfares and runs introduce the first entry of the chorus (which, as mentioned earlier, takes its part from the tympani’s first solo), while the orchestra recapitulates measures 2-16 at measures 34-50. The second cry of “Jauchzet” occurs at the start of the string’s downward run at measure 39, which takes on a particularly ecstatic tone, as it is now fully harmonized, with the sopranos’ line at a pitch over an octave above the first choral entry. As the choir begins the second theme (“Lasset das Sagen,” at measure 50) in the dominant (A major), one is struck by Bach’s artful mingling of new and old styles: while the “Jauchzet” theme is treated more or less homophonically, the “Lasset” begins in fugue-like imitative counterpoint. However, this counterpoint dissolves into homophonic writing on the line “verbannet die Klage” (at measure 65), the third motive of the movement; the polyphony vanishes along with the fear. Trumpets and drums re-introduce a recapitulation of the first section at measure 81, returning to D major. This time, the “Lasset” section begins with voices entering from lowest to highest (B-T-A-S, rather than T-A-B-S as earlier); additionally, at the crucial “verbannet” line at measure 119 where the choral writing becomes homophonic, trumpets and drums punctuate the line, literally driving away fear. The full orchestra closes this section in D major.

A quieter, polyphonic texture opens the next section at measure 138 on the line “Dienet dem Höchsten” (“Serve the All Highest”) in B minor, the relative minor to D. Here, one experiences a quieter joy at Jesus’ arrival, as “the words turn from exultation to service”¹³. The orchestra follows with a *piano* development of the “Jauchzet” theme, modulating through the keys of D major, B minor, E minor, and A major. At measure 186, the choir continues to

¹³ Ibid, 643.

develop the theme, bringing the section to a close at measure 201 in F-sharp minor. The quieter dynamics of this section make the sudden *da capo* recapitulation of the entire first section (measures 1 through 137) all the more striking, jolting the listener back into D major.

This *da capo* form creates an A-B-A pattern for the movement. The A section also has its own internal structure: an instrumental introduction, followed by an a-b-a-b pattern as the “Jauchzet” and “Lasset” sections alternate. Throughout, the three principal motives project the affect of the text—one of rejoicing, setting aside fear, and banishing lamentation—but most prominent is the initial “Jauchzet” theme. Indeed, this theme acts like a concerto ritornello, appearing in both tutti and soli sections, returning again and again throughout the work. “Bright and imperious, this music chases away vague dreams. It constrains and carries the listener along; there is no defense to this hurricane of joy.”¹⁴

The “Parody Problem” in the Christmas Oratorio

Although Bach’s music seems to skillfully project the affect of the text in “Jauchzet, frohlocket,” we are almost certain that this was not the music’s original text. Indeed, the music to all but 12 of the arias and choruses in the oratorio (including the first chorus) appears in Bach’s earlier secular cantatas BWV 213, 214, and 215, all composed in honor of the royal family of Saxony. (Indeed, an additional 7 of these 12, from the sixth part of the oratorio, are believed to come from a lost church cantata.¹⁵)

¹⁴ Pirro, 161.

¹⁵ Leaver, 93-95

What do we know of these three secular cantatas, which share so much material with the Oratorio? Recall that in the early 1730's, Bach wrote very few church cantatas, whether out of lack of interest or because he felt he had already tackled the genre; nevertheless, after taking over Leipzig's Collegium Musicum in 1729, he began to compose or adapt more secular music. Much of this music seems connected with his quest for a royal title, which began in 1733 after Friedrich August I¹⁶ died on February 1. During the period of mourning following the Elector's death, Bach compiled and sent a *Kyrie* and *Gloria* (the beginning of the Mass in B minor) to Friedrich August II¹⁷, the new Elector, along with a request for a royal title.¹⁸ Bach likely wanted a title to help him in his nearly incessant quarrels with the Leipzig town council. Less than two months after submitting the B minor scores, he began to produce a flurry of congratulatory secular cantatas in honor of the Elector and his family. In addition to the three connected with the Christmas Oratorio, he conducted BWV Anh12 for the Elector's name day, BWV 205a for the Elector's coronation as King of Poland, and BWV 207a for the Elector's birthday. These secular cantatas were likely all part of Bach's attempt to curry favor at the Dresden court, which finally paid off when he was named Court Composer in 1736.¹⁹

As a dozen movements in the Christmas Oratorio have almost exactly the same music as movements in these three secular cantatas, it is clear that Bach "parodied,"²⁰ or borrowed, music from one to the other. However, which came first: secular or sacred? The relationship between the secular cantatas and the Christmas Oratorio could be anywhere along a spectrum: First, the Christmas Oratorio could have been written first, and the secular cantatas adapted from it.

¹⁶ Known in Poland as King August II

¹⁷ King August III of Poland

¹⁸ Hans T. David, Arthur Mendel and Christoph Wolff, *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 158.

¹⁹ This title aided Bach in settling the "battle of the prefects." See Bach Reader 194-196.

Second, the secular cantatas could have been written first, but with the idea of re-working them into an oratorio or some other sacred work. Finally, the secular cantatas could have been written first, with no intention of later parody, but later adapted to suit Bach's needs. Responding to various theories explaining the nature of Bach's parody, Malcolm Boyd argues that "there is no evidence to support any of these views"²¹; nevertheless, one can at least examine what evidence is available, even if one cannot make a conclusive judgment as to the work's origins.

Theory 1: Sacred First, Secular Adapted

As the secular cantatas' performances antedate that of the Oratorio, most scholars believed that they were composed first. Charles Sanford Terry challenged this view in the October, November, and December 1930 issues of *The Musical Times*, arguing on both circumstantial and aesthetic grounds that Bach adapted the secular cantatas from the Oratorio and not the other way around.

Terry noted that all three of the secular cantatas were compiled under much more time pressure than the Christmas Oratorio, suggesting that he quickly adapted parts of his still-unfinished Oratorio to suit the secular occasions. Bach would choose to do this because he "had compelling practical reasons for not treating these occasional cantatas merely as the vehicles of refurbished music," and as such made sure to use sacred material that had not yet been performed.²² Furthermore, Bach had little reason to devote much time to the congratulatory cantatas; with the exception of BWV 215 none of the royal family was actually in attendance. Indeed, BWV 215 was only compiled at the last minute when the Elector arrived early to enjoy

²⁰ Note that "parody" is a musical term, which in this context does not have the standard mocking or comical connotations.

²¹ Malcolm Boyd, *Bach*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 166.

Leipzig's annual fair and Bach seized the occasion to perform an additional cantata (he had already prepared BWV 206 for the royal visit). William Giles Whittaker, who subscribed to Terry's theory, noted both the circumstances of BWV 214 and the enormous complexity of the first chorus (the same chorus analyzed earlier in this paper), and asked, "Could Bach, even with his almost superhuman powers, have written such a closely constructed number, on such a generous scale, in desperate haste?"²³

However, many have cited incongruities between the sacred Oratorio text and its music, in particular the first chorus. Simon Westrup called the first chorus "a good example of Bach's habit of borrowing material without worrying overmuch about its original associations...it would be untrue to say that [trumpets and drums] are entirely out of place in a chorus celebrating the birth of Christ, but the manner in which they are introduced is certainly unusual."²⁴ Indeed, while trumpets and drums were standard in both royal and jubilant works, and thus appropriate for the Christmas Season, as noted the drum solo is unique in Bach's sacred works. Nevertheless, Bach was to a large degree an innovator; he wrote innumerable works—both sacred and secular—that contain "unique" features. Robert L. Marshall discusses one such example, church cantata BWV 51, "Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen," arguing that its virtuosity, instrumentation, and flamboyance make it "unique and remarkable in just about every respect."²⁵

More compelling than the uniqueness of the drum solo, however, is the "close correspondence between text and instrumentation" in the secular work, especially in comparison with the Oratorio.²⁶ Just after the chorus sings "Tönet, ihr Pauken" ("Sound, you drums!") in

²² Charles Sanford Terry, "The 'Christmas Oratorio': Original or Borrowed?" *The Musical Times*, (London:Novello October 1, 1930), 887-889, 888.

²³ Whittaker, 644.

²⁴ Jack Allan Westrup, *Bach Cantatas* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969, 23.

²⁵ Robert L. Marshall, "Bach The Progressive: Observations on His Later Works," *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach: The Sources, the Style, the Significance*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989), 23-58, 27.

²⁶ Konrad Küster, "Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten!" *Oxford Composer Companion to J.S. Bach*, Ed. Malcolm Boyd, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 481.

BWV 214, the tympani has its solo; likewise, the line “Erschallet Trompeten!” (“Resound, trumpets”) is followed a few measures later by the trumpet fanfares. In the Oratorio, however, the equivalent words make no mention of instrumentation, but merely exhort the congregation to rejoice.

Some scholars, such as Malcolm Boyd, are particularly won over by the character of “the unison phrases of the opening chorus, which were clearly designed to imitate the drums and trumpets referred to in the [secular] text.”²⁷ Boyd goes on to argue that “Even the simple expedient of putting the first five notes of the sopranos into a higher octave...would have made the music better suited to the new text.”²⁸ J. Bernard Jackson, responding to Terry’s original article, also remarks that “the opening phrases of the voices” are such that “the sopranos...sound ineffective and toneless.”²⁹

However, as noted earlier, the low, unison entry of the chorus in monophonic texture—while not particularly jubilant—provides a striking contrast with the second setting of “Jauchzet” in homophonic texture at measure 39. Such a contrast in texture is a technique often found in the concerti of Antonio Vivaldi. The low first entry may also be meant to highlight the use of the word “Jauchzet” meaning “to shout,” while the second setting highlights its meaning “to rejoice.”

Another alleged inconsistency that bears mentioning is found in the aria “Flößt, mein Heiland” (Movement 39), where the soprano asks the Savior if she should fear death, and is answered by vocal and instrumental echoes. Its twin in BWV 213 is the alto aria “Treues Echo diser Orten,” in which Hercules asks the mythical Echo if he should follow the path of Virtue.

²⁷ Boyd, 168.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ J. Bernard Jackson, “The ‘Christmas Oratorio’: Original or Borrowed?” *The Musical Times*, (London:Novello January 1, 1930), 60-61, 61.

Some call these echoes “inappropriate” in a sacred work³⁰; Boyd argued that they “can sound incongruous, if not actually risible, in an oratorio performance.”³¹ Nevertheless, “the echo dialogue...refers to a tradition that reaches back well into the seventeenth century.”³² Indeed, others have found contemporary poems in which “the spouse of Jesus talks with an echo or reverberation.”³³ Thus, the echoes are not necessarily “inappropriate” in a sacred setting, as unusual as they may seem today.

Terry and Whittaker may have a point; even their critics find it hard to believe that the music was not originally written for the sacred text. Both Boyd and Alfred Dürr have noted that “Schlafe, mein Leibster is “entirely fitting as the shepherds’ lullaby to the infant Christ”³⁴ and that “we cannot conceive how it could belong anywhere else.”³⁵ Murray Young also shows how key nouns and verbs in the opening chorus of the Oratorio are punctuated by music that “would make any listener believe that this is an original chorus.”³⁶ Furthermore, while the appropriateness of the opening chorus and echo aria can be debated, some elements are equally as incongruous in the secular text: For example, while “Herr, dein Mitleid” in the oratorio is a duet between the soul and the Savior (a conventional technique in Bach’s sacred cantatas), its equivalent, “Ich bin deine” from BWV 213, is a curious love-duet between two male characters!

Responding to Terry’s original articles, P. Robinson noted with prescience, “I should wish to wait until the autographs of the cantatas...had been examined. For their state might

³⁰ Simon Heighes, “Christmas Oratorio,” *Oxford Composer Companion to J.S. Bach*, Ed. Malcolm Boyd, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 104-105, 104.

³¹ Boyd, 168.

³² Hans-Joachim Schulze, “The Parody Process in Bach’s Music: An Old Problem Reconsidered,” *Bach*, Vol. XX, No. 1 (Berea, Ohio: Riemenschneider Bach Institute, Spring 1989) 7-21, 15. Schulze’s article is an excellent survey of reactions to parody from Bach’s time up to the present.

³³ Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach: His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany, 1685-1750*, Vol II, (London: Novello and Company, Ltd., 1899), 587.

³⁴ Boyd, 168.

³⁵ Alfred Dürr, Preface to *Neuen Bach-Ausgabe Weihnachts-Oratorium*, (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1988, Trans. Peter Branscombe), 7.

³⁶ W. Murray Young, *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach : an analytical guide* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1989), 278.

conceivably prove that they could not possibly have borrowed from the oratorio.”³⁷ Indeed, while the theory that the Oratorio was composed first is compelling on circumstantial and aesthetic grounds, upon examination of the autograph scores one is compelled to believe otherwise. On the whole, movements common to the congratulatory cantatas and the Oratorio tend to have “composing scores” for the secular version, with “fair copy” scores for the sacred version.

For example, Dürr, examining the autograph for BWV 214, notes that Bach originally wrote in a line for the strings on the first page, later crossing them out to “agree with that given in the text....Undoubtedly what we have here is the draft of a new composition.”³⁸ He then notes that the opening chorus of the Oratorio’s autograph has very few changes, most of them to the vocal parts; “the general tidiness of the score shows that this is not an original composition but an adaptation.”³⁹ [See enclosed figures 1 and 2.] Most compelling, Dürr reveals that in this movement, “Bach was evidently so engrossed in copying from the original version that he inadvertently copied, with the music, a stretch of words from the secular work—these had to be crossed out and replaced with the sacred text.”⁴⁰

Stephen A. Crist finds similar characteristics in his analysis of the scores to the Oratorio’s “Erleucht auch mein finstre Sinnen” and its twin in BWV 215, “Durch die von Eifer entflammeten Waffen.” In the Christmas Oratorio, “the script is calligraphic, and there are relatively few corrections” while BWV 215’s autograph “provides clear testimony that this is a composing score rather than a copy. The general character of the handwriting is

³⁷ P. Robinson 62.*****

³⁸ Alfred Dürr, “Contemporary printed Editions, Autographs, Copies,” *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life, Times, Influence* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, Ed. Barbara Schwendowius and Wolfgang Dömling, Trans. John Coombs, 1977) 111-126, 116.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

hasty...formative corrections are found in all three lines.”⁴¹ Furthermore, a “continuation sketch” is found on the bottom of the first page of the secular version; Bach wrote such sketches as memory aids before turning the page while waiting for the ink to dry, mainly when he was in the process of composing a new melody.⁴²

Is it still possible that the Oratorio was written first? Yes—it is conceivable that Bach had some early sketches of the Oratorio on hand which he developed into secular cantatas. It is, nevertheless, highly unlikely that Bach had such sketches. Marshall notes that the character of Bach’s Leipzig scores “reveal[s] that Bach wrote down these compositions while he composed them. It is therefore doubtful that he kept many, if any, separate sketch books or sheets at this stage of his career.”⁴³

Theory 2: Secular First, Sacred in Mind

While the theory that the Christmas Oratorio was written before the secular cantatas BWV 213, 214, and 215 can be largely discredited on the basis of the autograph scores, it is still possible that Bach wrote the three secular cantatas with the idea of later adapting them into the Oratorio. That nearly every aria and chorus from BWV 213 and 214 (and several from 215) were adapted for later use, and that all the secular cantatas were written within one and a half years of the Oratorio, suggests that Bach may have planned to parody these works all along.

Bach would have been following a procedure that became quite common in his Leipzig years; indeed, there is at least one case (BWV 30a) in which the sacred version follows the

⁴¹ Stephen A. Crist, “The Question of Parody in Bach’s Cantata *Presie dein Glücke, gesegnetes Sachsen*, BWV 215,” *Bach Perspectives*, Vol. 1, Ed. Russell Stinson, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 135-161, 139.

secular by less than a year (much like the Christmas Oratorio), both with the same librettist, such that “it seems likely that both the secular and the sacred cantata were jointly conceived from the outset.”⁴⁴ One parallel between BWV 30a and the Christmas Oratorio is that both have movements with strikingly similar texts but different music from their secular antecedents. In BWV 30a, the recitatives for the secular and sacred versions were written as exact textual parodies, but Bach decided to compose new music for the sacred version; “it appears he did not feel that [the texts] corresponded sufficiently closely.”⁴⁵ Perhaps the textual similarity between, for example, the closing chorus of BWV 213 and the opening chorus of the fifth part of the Christmas Oratorio are also signs of simultaneous libretto writing which was also rejected by Bach, requiring new music.

However, if the librettist for BWV 213, Christian Friedrich Henrici (“Picander”), attempted such a feat, it is unusual that Picander did not include the Oratorio in his compendium of works. Dürr, arguing that the Oratorio libretto was based on the previously set secular version with close collaboration between Bach and Picander, speculates that “perhaps [Bach’s alterations] made Picander unwilling to publish the text under his own name.”⁴⁶ Additionally, the libretto to BWV 214 was likely not authored by Picander, but by Bach himself—the libretto has the initials “J.S.B.,” and also begins and ends with “J.J.” and “S.D.GI,” which Bach often wrote on his scores.⁴⁷

Even if the libretti were not written simultaneously, it is still highly probable that Bach had the Oratorio in mind when writing the secular cantatas. Many have argued that they were

⁴² Robert L. Marshall, “The Sketches,” *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach: The Sources, the Style, the Significance*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989), 111-129, 120-121.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁴ Nikolaus Harnoncourt, “Bach’s Use of ‘Parody’,” *The Musical Dialogue: Thoughts on Monteverdi, Bach and Mozart*, Trans. Mary O’Neill (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1989) 63-72, 64.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁶ Dürr Preface to NBA, 7.

⁴⁷ The importance of these initials shall be discussed later.

composed “with a view to the oratorio, already planned; that is, whether the secular versions are to be regarded as mere rough drafts.”⁴⁸ This view is slightly weakened because Bach did not parody all of BWV 213, 214, and 215; for example, Bellona’s aria in BWV 214 was not adapted (likely because of its inappropriately “almost *galant* character), suggesting that the secular cantata was “planned and composed independently.”⁴⁹ Still, that he eventually decided not to use every movement from the three secular cantatas is perhaps more indicative of his high standards for parody rather than a lack of planning. Nevertheless, even if Bach didn’t have the Christmas Oratorio in mind specifically, it seems unlikely that he would compose the secular works with no thought whatsoever to adapting them to sacred use. As noted, such had been his procedure many times before⁵⁰; surely the proximity and quantity of the adaptation from these three cantatas suggests that Bach had some notion of re-using the cantatas.

Theory 3: Secular First, Sacred Adapted

Arguments that the Oratorio was composed (or at least conceived of) before the secular cantatas aside, it is still quite possible that Bach wrote the congratulatory cantatas independently, only later deciding to adapt them to a sacred text. Perhaps he merely ran out of time, as “by this time Bach had got out of the habit of working under the heavy pressure which had driven him on

⁴⁸ Schulze, 17.

⁴⁹ Küster, 481.

⁵⁰ Interestingly, although Bach composed many parodies of his secular works into sacred works, there is only one instance (the Trauer-Ode for Prince Leopold of Cöthen, adapted from the St. Matthew Passion) of his borrowing from a sacred work for a secular one.

during his first three or four years in Leipzig.”⁵¹ Can such a procedure be justified? Does it detract from the quality of the work?

One need only examine the undisputedly original parts of the Oratorio—especially the Sinfonia that introduces the second section—to understand that Bach did not parody the secular cantatas out of lack of inspiration.⁵² Rather, he likely saw adapting the secular cantatas as a way of preserving good music, rescuing it from oblivion; “Bach by all means wanted to let his church have the advantage of appropriating the best of his extralitururgical work.”⁵³ “It must certainly be discouraging for a composer of Bach’s stature to invest all his genius and effort in a homage cantata which is to be performed for a single occasion and never used again”⁵⁴; by parodying these homage cantatas in a church work associated with an annual festival, Bach assured the music’s “annual performance within the framework of the church calendar.”⁵⁵

Indeed, many forget that the secular cantatas have *good music*; Bach would have wanted that music to be heard. In Bach’s time—much more than today, and even much more than the century following him—one composed for *performance*, not for posterity (whether via recording or publication). If a work was not performed, it died. Yes, Bach may have cared a great deal about his posterity⁵⁶, but few of his large choral works and cantatas were ever published (nor did he show much interest in publishing them). Schulze notes that “only the best material stays in the repertoire,” and that since Bach showed “a nearly narcissistic partiality to his own compositions,”⁵⁷ trying to find a suitable means of re-performance was one practical way of keeping his favorite music in regular performance.

⁵¹ Westrup, 21. One might take exception to Westrup’s argument by noting that if, indeed, the secular cantatas were composed first, they were each composed under extreme time pressure.

⁵² Boyd, 168.

⁵³ Günther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984), 228.

⁵⁴ Harnoncourt, 64.

⁵⁵ Dürr Preface to NBA, 7.

⁵⁶ Some cite his interest in preserving the history of the Bach family or his Art of Fugue as examples of this.

⁵⁷ Schulze, 18-19.

One must also keep in mind that in Bach's time, "originality *per se* was not the major criterion of artistic judgement that it is today."⁵⁸ Parody did not deflate the value of a work; it was "legitimate, provided only that the character of the music—its 'affect' as it was termed in those days—remained the same."⁵⁹ Indeed, one could compare Bach's parody process to contemporary music groups releasing a "Best of..." anthology.

Part of what made this parody easy was the similarity between Bach's secular and sacred cantata styles.⁶⁰ Westrup argues that "In practice it is quite impossible to make any distinction between the idioms of secular and sacred music: secular music in church sounds inappropriate only when it has purely secular associations."⁶¹ Nevertheless, some people take exception to this similarity: how could such heavenly music be inspired by obsequious praise of the Saxon royal family? If, indeed, Bach adapted the Oratorio from purely secular works, is he not profaning the church by introducing music written in praise of royalty, not God?

It seems quite clear that, for Bach, there was no such thing as purely secular music. Surely, music for the court or Collegium Musicum was not church music *per se*, but it seems clear that in Bach's conception, *all* music glorified God. Indeed, he would paraphrase Friedrich Ehrhard Niedt on the subject of figured bass to his students:

...the result is a well-sounding harmony to the glory of God and the justifiable gratification of the senses; for the sole end and aim of all music, as well as that of the Figured Bass, should be nothing else than for the glory of God and pleasant recreations. Where this object is not kept in view there can be no true music but only an infernal scraping and bawling.⁶²

⁵⁸ Heighes, 104.

⁵⁹ Dürr "Contemporary printed Editions" 116.

⁶⁰ Stiller, 228-229.

⁶¹ Westrup, 17.

⁶² Robin A. Leaver, *J.S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1985), 107. Also see the Bach Reader 16-17.

Thus, for Bach, even thorough bass—the foundation of all music, sacred or secular—praises God. This view is actually not far from that of Martin Luther, who based many of his hymns on popular, secular songs.⁶³ Some have shown “within Lutheranism a synthetic—rather than antithetic—stance towards sacred and secular music developed from the Reformation era onwards...[but] they overstate the case when they claim that the synthesis effectively meant that there was no distinction between the sacred and secular.”⁶⁴ While people of Bach’s time clearly understood the difference between sacred and secular music, it is interesting that no one is known to have complained about the “secularization” of Leipzig’s church music; one could argue that this is because in Bach’s time, Lutheranism had no strict dualism of sacred and secular (as did the Catholics).⁶⁵

One example of Bach’s conception of all music glorifying God is his use of trumpets and drums. Recall that such instruments were associated with royalty; by using them in his sacred music (particularly in pieces adapted from secular works written for royalty, such as the first chorus of the Oratorio), Bach perhaps draws a connection between God and King that seems unsettling today. However, in Baroque times both were so much more exalted than the common man that “an identification of the two figures did not seem blasphemous.”⁶⁶ Indeed, Robin A. Leaver argues:

...in the period prior to the French and American Revolutions royalty was understood in theological terms. When Bach and his contemporaries celebrated the earthly majesty of their ruler they did so with the understanding that such dignity is God-given, and that, however imperfectly the ruler may exercise his office, it is the office as embodied by the person, rather than the person alone, that is being celebrated. From Bach’s point of view, the celebration of the birthday of a prince is also the celebration of the majesty of God, and therefore the music composed for such an occasion can be reused for the overt praise of the ‘royal’ birth of the Son of God.⁶⁷

⁶³ Harnoncourt, 65.

⁶⁴ Leaver “The mature vocal works,” 91.

⁶⁵ Stiller, 149.

⁶⁶ Harnoncourt, 65.

⁶⁷ Leaver “The mature vocal works,” 96.

Still, some believe that Bach's re-use of secular material shows not his identification of all music with praising God's glory, but rather his growing disinterest in composing sacred music after 1730. Friedrich Blume in particular argues that Bach underwent a spiritual crisis in 1730, such that many "sacred" works from the period afterwards (such as the Christmas Oratorio) "have...nothing in common with [Christian] values and sentiments and were not written with the intention of proclaiming the composer's Christian faith, still less from a heartfelt need to do so."⁶⁸ This view has been largely discredited by the relatively recent discovery of Bach's copy of Abraham Calov's Bible commentary in 1934; each has "J S Bach 1733" on the title page; this suggests that either Bach bought the commentary during the supposed time of his spiritual crisis and "that in the face of unpopularity and misunderstanding, Bach was drawing on the resources of his faith and digging deeper into its foundation" or perhaps that during the renovation of the Thomasschule he used the period of mourning after Friedrich August I's death to put his library in order.⁶⁹ Either way, it seems clear that the commentary—and his Lutheran faith—remained important even in the 1730's.

In the commentary, Calov ends many sections with "Gott allein die Ehre" (To God alone the Glory), a phrase that was apparently very important to Bach.⁷⁰ In Latin, it is rendered "Soli Deo Gloria," and "S.D.G." or some variation thereof appears on many of Bach's sacred and secular manuscripts. Most interesting in view of the Christmas Oratorio, "D.S.Gl." appears on both BWV 213 and 214, two of the secular cantatas eventually adapted for use in the Oratorio. Leaver argues that "for Bach, the ascription 'S.D.G' at the end of his manuscripts was no empty formality; it was an aim he pursued throughout his life, as can be documented from his own writing"; in particular, Leaver cites Bach's "request for dismissal from the post of organist of the

⁶⁸ Quoted in Stiller, 172.

⁶⁹ Leaver *J.S. Bach and Scripture*, 26-27

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 105.

Blasiuskirche [which] included the statement that his aim in life was to compose and direct ‘regulirte kirchen music zu Gottes Ehren,’ well-regulated church music to the glory of God.”⁷¹ As Bach saw all his music as glorifying God—even his secular pieces—he merely “restored them to their native home when he applied them to church uses.”⁷²

Conjectures about which came first and whether parody is appropriate aside, do both the sacred and secular texts work? That is, what of the problem that “Bach’s music does not find its one and only true partner in a particular text”⁷³, particularly in view of Bach’s comment to his pupil Johann Gotthilf Zeigler “not to play [songs] merely offhand but according to the Affekt of the words”?⁷⁴ Nikolaus Harnoncourt argues that while “words and music are intimately linked to each other in the works of Bach”, one must remember that even Monteverdi “one of the most vigorous champions of intimate word-tone relationships,” did parodies of sacred works from secular ones.⁷⁵

This intimate connection between words and music is borne out by the subtle changes which Bach made to his music in the parody process, so as to make the old music fit the new words. We have already mentioned Bach’s high standards for parody, as he sometimes decided to compose entirely new music if he felt the original text was not close enough to the parody text (e.g. the opening chorus to the fifth part of the Christmas Oratorio). Contemporaries of Bach were often distressed when their parody attempts failed,⁷⁶ but it seems that Bach’s high standards did not allow for such failures; one need only examine his parody process in the Christmas Oratorio to recognize his facility in adapting old works to new texts: The aria “Bereite dich,

⁷¹ Ibid, 107.

⁷² Spitta, 577.

⁷³ Schulze, 11.

⁷⁴ David, Mendel and Wolff, 336.

⁷⁵ Harnoncourt, 63.

⁷⁶ Schulze, 13.

Zion,” which joyfully exhorts the congregation to prepare for Christ’s arrival, for example, was originally “Ich will dich nich Hören,” a harsh rejection of Lust. Nevertheless, “By changing the orchestration and the manner of articulating the melodic line...Bach transformed the affectation from harshness to tenderness.”⁷⁷ Likewise, in the first chorus of the Oratorio, the vocal line at measure 78 is skillfully adapted from the original text, “lebe” (live), to the new text, “jauchzen” (rejoice), as Bach replaces the sustained ties in the original secular text with melodic movements “in three different rhythms, in an uncommonly strong setting of the word ‘jauchzen’.”⁷⁸ Bach’s parody process is careful, judicious, and sensitive, with the result that “the parody rises above its original artistically.”⁷⁹ As it is parodied from a number of secular sources, Bach’s Christmas Oratorio “is a composition in the original meaning of the word”⁸⁰. We may perhaps marvel at Bach’s facility at sublimely parodying old music as equally as we marvel at his ability to make new music.

While Bach’s Oratorio may not fit in standard conceptions of the genre and while it is likely the product of musical parody, that Bach was able to achieve dramatic, musical, and structural unity from seemingly unconnected sources, weaving new music with artful adaptations of old compositions, is truly remarkable. If anything, knowledge that his sublime Oratorio has secular origins only adds to our appreciation of its moving spirituality and Bach’s miraculous ability to produce such a work.

⁷⁷ Smither Vol. II, 163.

⁷⁸ Walter Blankenburg, “Das Parodieverfahren im Weihnachtsoratorium Johann Sebastian Bachs,” *Johann Sebastian Bach*, Ed. Walter Blankenburg, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970) 493-506, 500-501. Originally published in *Musik und Kirche* Vol. 32, 1962, 245-254.

⁷⁹ Blankenburg, quoted in Stiller, 225-227.

⁸⁰ Alfred Mann, “Bach’s parody technique and its frontiers,” *Bach Studies*, Ed. Don O. Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 115-124, 124.