The Canberra Bach Ensemble will return for its next performance in late August...

Cantatas in the Cathedral

St Christopher's Cathedral
26 June 1999
It is with great pleasure that we present tonight’s inaugural performance of the Canberra Bach Ensemble, a recently established small scale group of choristers and instrumentalists who have a strong interest and devotion to the music of J.S. Bach. This concert is the first of a series that will be presented over the remainder of this year in preparation for the 250th anniversary of Bach’s death next year. The ensemble is primarily dedicated to performing Bach’s sacred repertory, namely cantatas, motets, masses and organ works, as well as compatible works by other composers.

The reason for choosing Bach’s music to be the central performance repertory is because his compositional output demonstrates a sophisticated web of musical and liturgical relationships which is endlessly fascinating on many levels. It is a most satisfying experience to explore and identify the relationships between hundreds of sacred works across various genre, revealing the depth, breadth and intensity of Bach’s creative craft. The goal of the Canberra Bach Ensemble is to put together performances which highlight various liturgical and musical themes, so that one can reflect on the transcendental ideas which Bach deals with in his music, whether it be through singing, playing or listening.

For our first concert, it seems appropriate that we are performing two of Bach’s earliest cantatas, *Aus der Tiefe rufe ich, Herr, zu dir* BWV 131 and *Christ lag in Todes Banden* BWV 4. It is extraordinary to think that these cantatas were written by a man in his early twenties (about the same age as many of the singers and players tonight I might add) - with a sophistication inherent in these works anticipating what was to come later in his musical career. It should also be noted that the organ pieces chosen, namely the simple four-part chorales and chorale preludes, are closely related to their respective cantatas.

The Canberra Bach Ensemble intends to become an established feature of the Canberra music scene, filling a long neglected gap and providing quality performances of Bach’s works in the spirit of recent developments in period performance practice. The performances promise to unlock the most enlightening aspects of the aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual qualities of Bach’s finest gems.

Andrew Koll (Director)
Mühlhausen cantatas

In their historical context, Bach's works can be seen as the development and perfection of a variety of musical forms: chorale, fugue, and passion, to name but three. But, more than any other form, it was the cantata into which Bach was to pour so much of his creative energies throughout his entire musical career.

What is so astonishing about the two cantatas presented this evening is the degree of mastery demonstrated in some of Bach's first experiments in the form. Both works were composed during his time in Mühlhausen (1707–8) and they share a number of features in common with other cantatas he wrote while he was there: unusual scoring (two viola parts), notational peculiarities, an overall structure which is strongly symmetrical, and 'choruses' in the style of the (Latin) motets of the period. Almost all of the Mühlhausen cantatas—including those performed tonight—have an opening sinfonia; in the case of Aus der Tiefe this has been merged with the opening chorus. Absent are the operatic additions (recitatives and da capo arias) that would become crucial elements of the Weimar and Leipzig cantatas, not to mention the passions! Rather, in these earlier cantatas Bach showed his indebtedness to his (musical) predecessors, including Dietrich Buxtehude (whom Bach visited in 1705), whose chorale cantatas would have left a strong impression; indeed, for Bach they were a point of departure.

The text of Aus der Tiefe is taken from Psalm 130 and two verses (printed below in italics) of Bartholomäus Ringwald's hymn 'Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut'. Both psalm and hymn were traditionally associated with penitential services, and it was suggested by Charles Terry (although there is no definitive proof) that the cantata was commissioned for a memorial service after the fire which burned through large areas of Mühlhausen in June 1707.

Of the five movements, the first, middle, and last are choruses, each of which bears some structural resemblance to the organ prelude and fugue; indeed, Bach's inexperience with the form shows through from time to time, as both vocal and instrumental parts contain fragments that are idiomatic for the organ. Nonetheless, we can see that at this early stage of his career Bach had already achieved considerable facility in the writing of fugues.

The second and fourth movements are duets; in each, a soloist sings a free setting of the psalm text, while one of the choir parts sings a strict setting of the hymn. The duets serve a number of purposes: as 'glue' to bind the cantata together and to provide a musical contrast to the choruses, and as an opportunity for the listener to meditate on the psalm and consider their personal response. As such, they function in a similar way to the corresponding movements of Bach's motets Jesu, meine Freude and Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied.

As part of the job application for the organist position at Mühlhausen, Bach was required to provide a vocal composition. Christoph Wolff has suggested that this work was probably Christ lag in Todes Banden.

Bach took all seven verses of Martin Luther's easter hymn, together with Luther's own tune (itself based on the medieval Easter carol Christ ist erstanden), and used them as the basis for a work that was to be 'the strictest chorale cantata Bach ever wrote' (John Eliot Gardiner). The chorale tune functions as a powerful unifying force; it is hinted at in the opening sinfonia, and can be heard clearly in each verse, as a cantus firmus that penetrates through dense figuration in the other voices (sopranos in verse one and altos in verse four), as a duet (verses two and six), as a solo (verses three and five) or as a plain chorale setting (verse seven). The musical settings are always sympathetic to the text, and each 'hallelujah' is interpreted according to the mood of the verse. The text itself is rich in imagery, linking the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ with the details of the first passover meal (detailed in Exodus 11–12), in which an unblemished lamb was roasted in fire; and its blood spread on the doorposts as a sign to God's 'destroyer' that he should not harm anyone inside. There is also a reference to the eating of unleavened bread at this time; 'the old leaven' refers to 1 Corinthians 5:6–8, in which Paul calls on his readers to 'celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth' (NASB).

As was the custom of the time, Bach revisited his compositions and made changes to suit particular performance conditions; the availability of performers was often a consideration. For this evening's performance of Christ lag in Todes Banden we have adopted the modifications Bach made for the 1724 Leipzig performance: the addition of a cornett (not to be confused with the modern cornet) and trombones to double the vocal parts in verses one, two, and seven. We do not even have the original setting of verse seven: the chorale setting you will hear dates from the Leipzig revision and is typical of the way Bach ended his later cantatas. (It has been speculated that the final verse was instead sung to the music of the first, emphasizing the symmetry even further.) Throughout the concert you will hear a number of additional organ pieces. These have been chosen to highlight the chorale tunes Bach used as the basis for the cantatas.

Further reading and listening


Aus der Tiefe rufe ich, Herr, zu dir, BWV 131

Aus der Tiefe rufe ich, Herr, zu dir. 
Herr, höre meine Stimme, 
läßt deine Ohren merken 
die Stimme meines Flehens!

So du willst, Herr, Stunde zunehmen, 
Herr, wer will bestehen? 
Denn bei dir ist die Vergebung, 
daß man sich fürbete.

Erhärbe dich mein in solcher Last, 
wo sie aus meinem Herzen, 
darzu du sie gebüßt hast 
am Heil am Todeschmerz, 
und daß ich nicht mit großem Wul 
in meinen Sünden untergehe, 
noch ewigerversege.

Ich harre des Herrn, 
meine Seele harrt, 
und ich hoffe auf sein Wort.

Meine Seele wartet auf den Herrn 
von einer Morgenwache bis zu der andern.

Und weil ich denn in meinem Sinn, 
wie ich zwei geklagt, 
auch ein bitterer Sünden bin, 
den mein Gewissen nagen, 
und wollte gern im Blute dein 
von Sünden abwagen sein 
wie David und Manasseh.

Israel hoffte auf den Herrn; 
denn bei dem Herrn ist die Gnade 
und viel Erlebnis bei ihm. 
Und er wird Israel erlösen 
aus allen seinen Sünden.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, 
Let your ears attend to 
your pleading voice.

If you, O Lord, will count sins, 
Lord, who will stand? 
But forgiveness is with you, 
that you may be feared.

Take pity on my burden, 
remove it from my heart, 
for you have hasted for it 
on the wood with the pain of death, 
so that I might not drown 
in my sins in great despair, 
nor eternally lose heart.

I wait for the Lord, 
my soul waits, 
and I hope in his word.

My soul waits for the Lord 
from one morning watch to the next.

And since in my spirit, 
as I have long lamented, 
I am a distrest sinner, 
grassed by his conscience, 
and would gladly be watched 
in your blood from sins, 
like David and Manasseh.

O Israel, hope in the Lord; 
for with the Lord there is loving kindness 
and with him is abundant redemption. 
And he will redeem Israel 
from all his sins.

Christ lag in Todes Banden, BWV 4 continued...

Versus 3: solo (tenor)
Jesus Christus, Gottes Sohn,
an unser Statt ist kommen 
und hat die Sünde weggetan, 
damit dem Tod genommen 
all sein Recht und sein Gewalt; 
da bleibt nichts denn Tods Gestalt, 
den Stachel hat er verloren. 
Hallelujah.

Versus 4: chorus
Es war ein wunderlicher Krieg, 
da Tod und Leben rangen, 
das Leben (da) behielt den Sieg, 
es hat den Tod verschlungen. 
Die Schißt hat verkündigt das, 
as ein Tod den andern frägt, 
ein Sport aus dem Tod ist worden. 
Hallelujah.

Interlude: chorale prelude
Versus 5: solo (bass)
Hier ist das rechte Osterlamm, 
davon Gott hat geboten, 
das ist hoch an des Kreuzes Stamm 
in heiliger Liebe gebraten, 
das Blut zeichnet unser Tön, 
das hüllt der Glaub dem Tode für, 
der Würg kann uns nicht mehr schaden. 
Hallelujah.

Versus 6: duett (soprano, tenor)
So feiern wir das heilte Fest 
mit Herzensfreude und Wonne, 
das uns der Herr erscheinen läßt. 
Er ist aller die Sonne, 
der durch seiner Gnade Glanz 
erleuchtet unser Herzen ganz, 
der Sünden Nacht ist verschwunden. 
Hallelujah.

Versus 7: chorale
Wir essen und leben wohl 
in rechtem Osterlamm, 
der alte Sauerreig nicht soll 
sein bei dem Wort der Gnaden, 
Christus will die Kaste sein 
und spreiten die Seele allein, 
der Glaub will kein andern leben. 
Hallelujah.

Notes and translations © 1999 by Richard Walker
Richard Anderson (bass soloist)
Richard began his musical training at Sydney's St. Andrew's Cathedral, singing treble and then bass in the cathedral choir. He then moved to Canberra and continued his studies at the Canberra School of Music. Since returning to Sydney in 1996, Richard has become a sought after participant in a variety of projects especially in Renaissance, Baroque and 20th century performances. He has appeared at the Barossa Festival and the Burwood Early Music Festival, and in concert and recordings with the Song Company, the Contemporary Singers and the Sydney Alpha Ensemble et al. Richard is currently engaged with Opera Australia and is the organist of St. John the Evangelist, Balmain.

Peter Campbell (tenor soloist)
Having graduated from ANU with degrees in economics, art history and musicology Peter is now completing a Ph.D in Australian music history at the University of Melbourne. He has sung in choirs since the age of eight and was treasurer of the Canberra Choral Society for thirteen years. He now sings with the early music group Ensemble Gombert, conducted by John O'Donnell, and has participated in several freelance recording projects and concerts.

Nicolas Chen (organ soloist)
Nicolas Chen, a 17 year-old student in his final year in Sydney Grammar School, has been learning pipe organ from Robert Wagner for six years, and last year received his diploma in his study (A Mus A.). This year he is taking a more relaxed year in music due to his studies but occasionally performs.

Andrew Koll (director)
Having completed his honours degree in musicology last year at the Canberra School of Music, Andrew is currently doing a masters in conducting at the Sydney Conservatorium with Henry Pisarek and Mats Nilsson. Andrew recently concluded a successful three year association with the Canberra Community Orchestra, performing a wide range of works from the classical, nineteenth and twentieth century repertory, as well a number of new works by Neylon and Elizondo. Last year Andrew attended a masterclass on Bach's motets with Stuttgart conductor Frieder Bernius in Namur, Belgium and, not surprisingly, Andrew's main research area has been centred on Bach's music and the evolution of its performance over the last half century.

choristers
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Lucie Alexander
Kate Atkinson
Helen Thomson

Alto
Peter Campbell
Alison Cone
Jaki Kane
Kate Moore

instrumentalists
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Glen Hart
Valerie Jackson
David Le Guen
John Ma
Imogen Perley
Viola
Craig McHugh
Ruth Riach
Jeremy Tatchell
Catherine Turnbull
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Rowena Higgs
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