

Baroque Vocal Music

Opera, Oratorio, and Cantata

The Castrati

- ~ Every generation claims that the art of singing is on the road to perdition. Every age might be right. It could well be that singing has been in decline ever since the castrati, those ungainly, spoiled, vain capons, trod the stage and were chased by women all over Europe.

—Harold C. Schoenberg

The Castrati

- ~ Cost of living in London, 1737
 - ~ Comfortable: £30
 - ~ Gentleman: £100

The Castrati



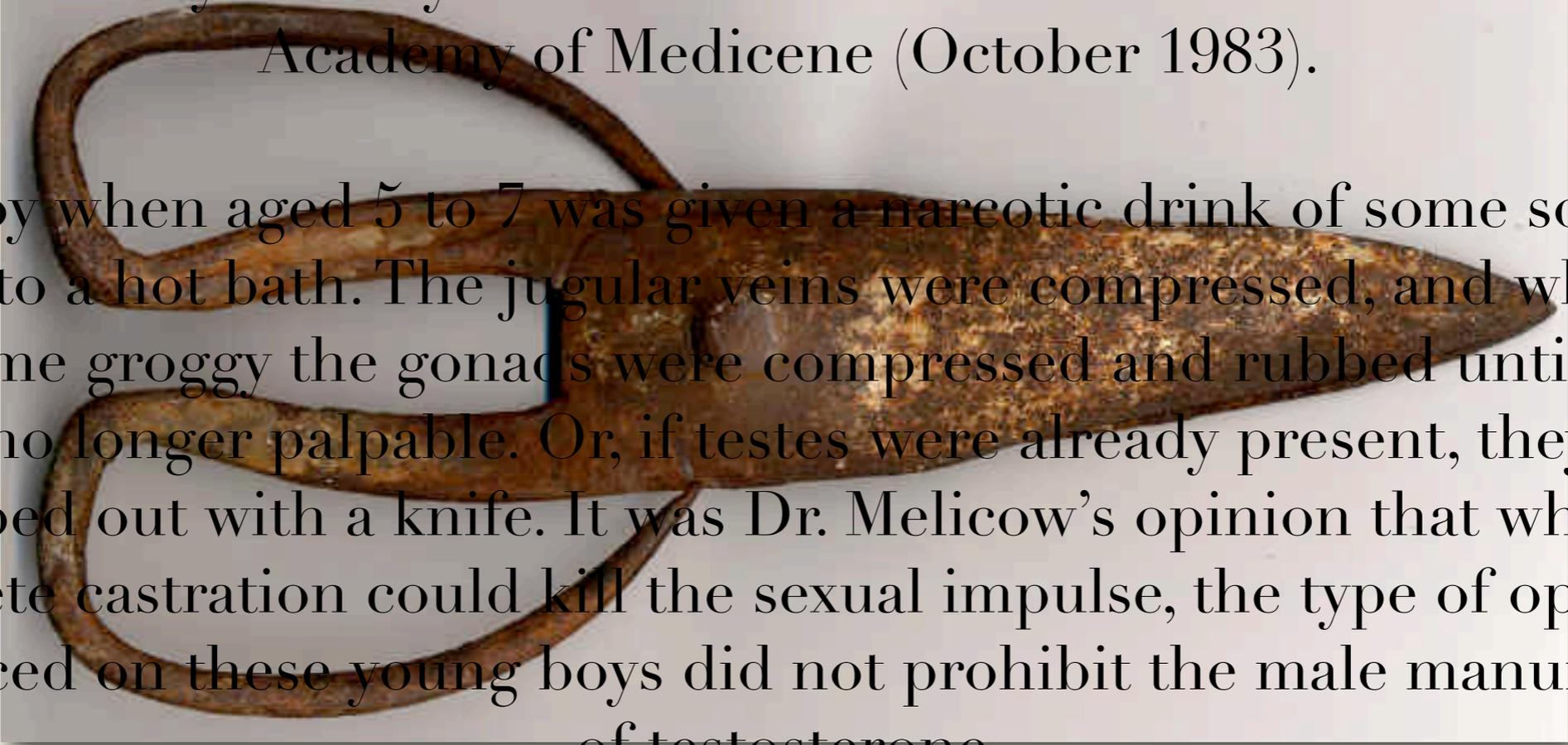
Caffarelli:

£30,000

The Castrati

Surgical Procedure

Described by Dr. Meyer M. Melicow in the Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine (October 1983).



The boy when aged 5 to 7 was given a narcotic drink of some sort, and put into a hot bath. The jugular veins were compressed, and when he became groggy the gonads were compressed and rubbed until they were no longer palpable. Or, if testes were already present, they were snipped out with a knife. It was Dr. Melicow's opinion that whereas complete castration could kill the sexual impulse, the type of operation practiced on these young boys did not prohibit the male manufacture of testosterone.

The Last Castrato

Alessandro Moreschi



More Likely Sound

- ~ Vivica Genaux singing an aria written for Farinelli by his brother, Riccardo Broschi.
- ~ The combination of speed, agility, and sheer stamina is deeply impressive.
- ~ Other arias could require beautiful, floating and effortlessly sustained sounds.

Opera Seria

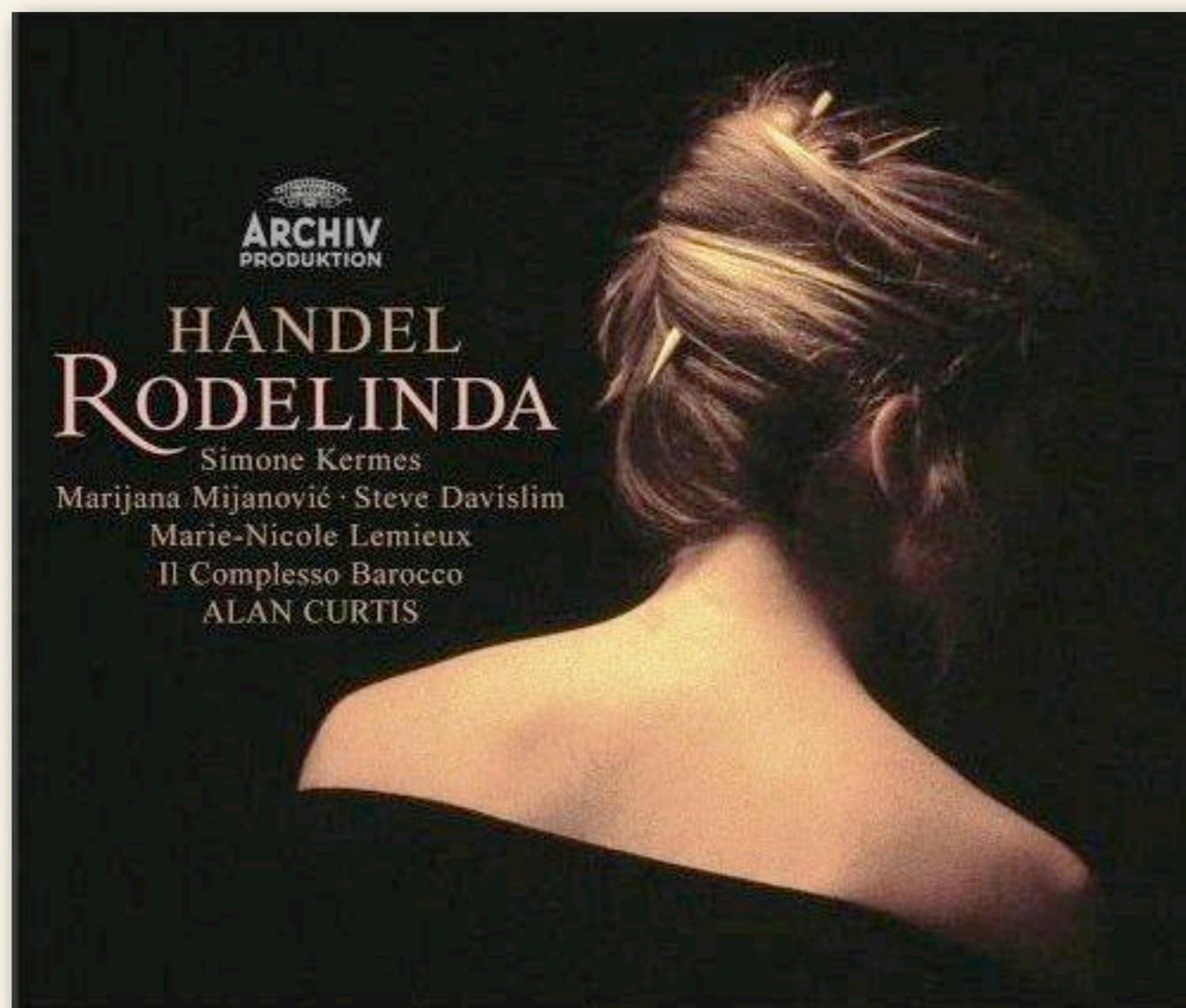
- ~ “Serious” opera
- ~ Mythological or Historical Plots
- ~ Spectacular sets and costumes
- ~ Showcase for superstar singers

Recitative

- ~ *Recitativo Secco*
 - ~ “Dry”
 - ~ Voice and continuo only
 - ~ Pitches follow vocal inflections, rather than being melodic.

Recitativo Secco

Handel: *Rodelinda*

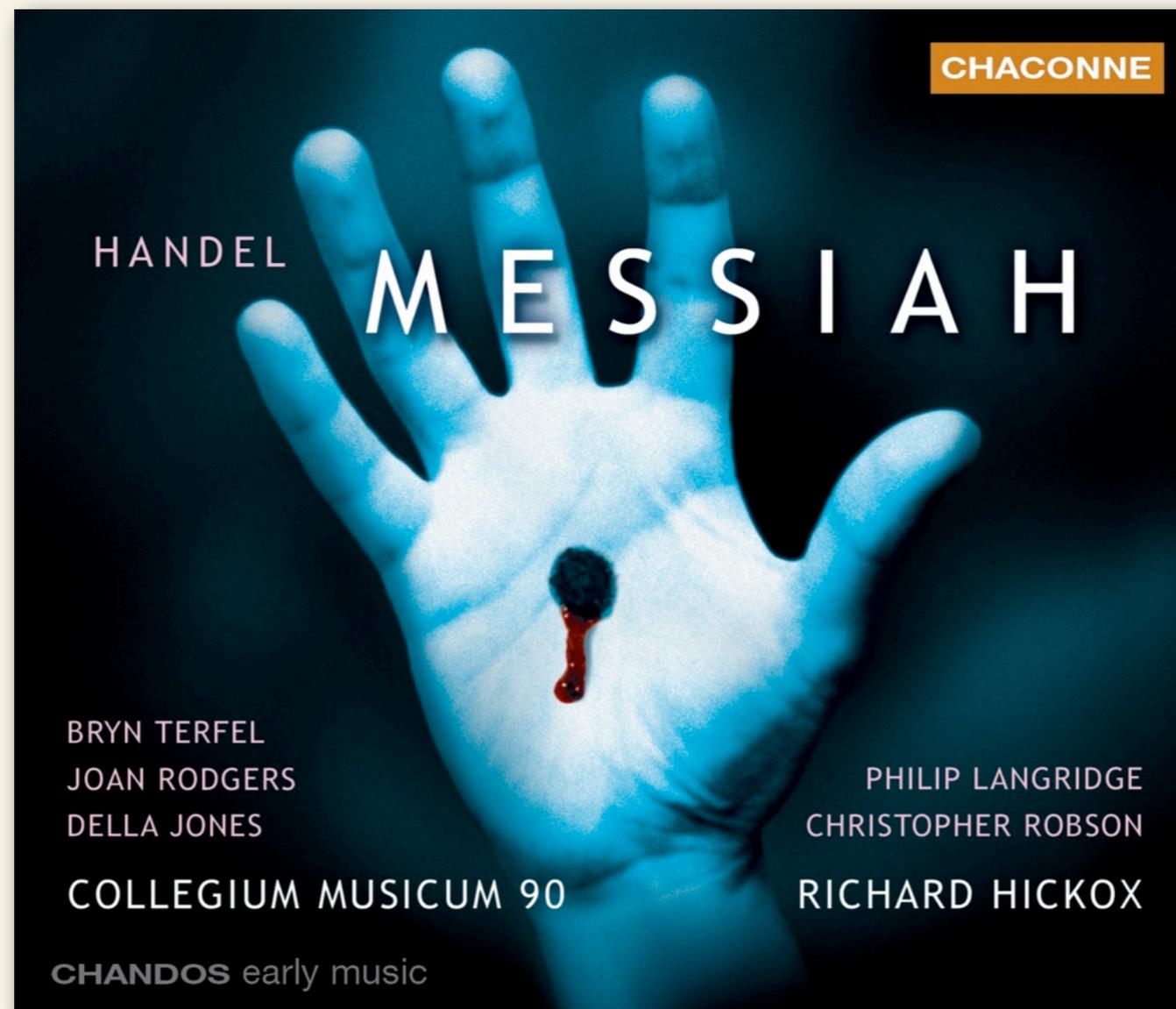


Recitative

- ~ *Recitativo Accompagnato*
 - ~ Quasi-melodic
 - ~ Orchestra in the background
 - ~ Usually a few in every opera seria

Recitativo Accompagnato

Handel: “There were Shepherds” from *Messiah*



Aria

- ~ Set piece for solo singer
- ~ Fully orchestrated
- ~ Generally not plot advancement, but a reflection on an idea or a mood.
- ~ Very simple text, repeated numerous times.

Aria

- ~ *da Capo* Form
- ~ Stanza 1 – Stanza 2 – Stanza 1 *da capo*
- ~ The composer writes music up to the end of stanza 2.
 - ~ Singers were expected to improvise parts of the *da capo*

George Frederic Handel:
Giulio Cesare in Egitto

“La giustizia”
(Justice)



After the murder of Pompey—the general who warred with Caesar, fled to Egypt, and was killed—Sextus (Pompey’s son) swears vengeance on Cleopatra’s brother Ptolemy who (according to this opera) was Pompey’s murderer.

R

1

1

1

R

2

da Capo

- ~ Structure of this *da Capo* aria:
 - ~ Stanza 1 is sung three times, each time with a slightly different melody.
 - ~ Stanza 2 is sung once.
 - ~ Ritornelli (instrumental) separate each section.
 - ~ The *da Capo* opens with an abbreviated ritornello.

R

1

1

1

R

2

da Capo

Ritornello

Handel

- ~ As an opera impresario, Handel was obliged to deal with opera singers on a regular basis.
- ~ The men — castrati, tenors, and baritones — weren't much trouble as a rule, although the castrati were *expensive*.

Handel

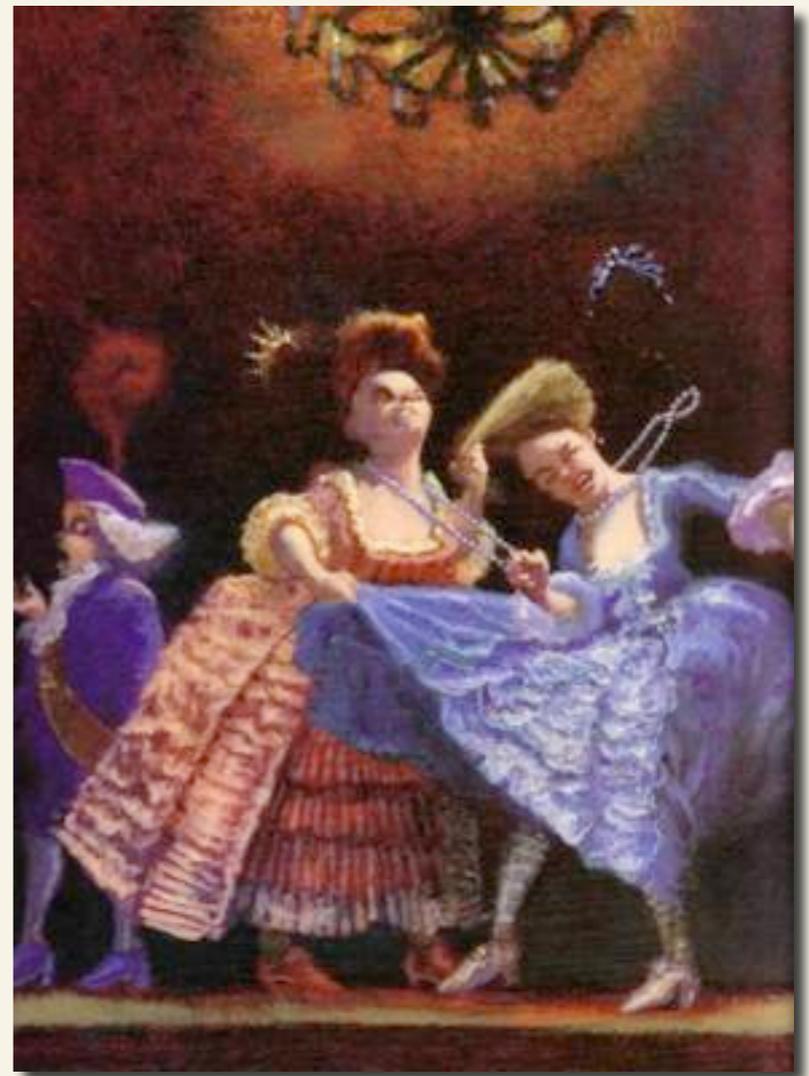
- ~ The women were sometimes a different matter altogether...

Handel

- ~ Two divas — Faustina and Cuzzoni — who were bitter rivals...
- ~ Cast in the same opera on the night of June 6, 1727...

Handel

They erupted into an onstage hair-pulling and shoving match!



Handel

George had to be a
very patient guy.



Oratorio

- ~ Similar to opera except:
 - ~ No costumes or staging
 - ~ A lot of choral numbers
 - ~ Typically on biblical topics
 - ~ Some of Handel's might be otherwise, though.

Oratorio

~ Some of Handel's biblical oratorios:

- Saul
- Solomon
- Judas Maccabeus
- Joshua
- Esther
- Deborah
- Susannah

Oratorio

- ~ Some of his non-biblical oratorios:
 - Hercules
 - Semele
 - The Triumph of Time and Truth
 - The Occasional Oratorio
 - Acis and Galatea
 - The Choice of Hercules

Handel

Where Bach was a provincial, a German who never left Germany, his great contemporary George Frideric Handel was a cosmopolite, a man of the world, an independent figure, one of the first great composers to be also a business man of music. George Frideric Handel: a big man and a lusty one; a naturalized British subject who spoke English with a heavy accent; a man with an explosive temperament and withal a sweet-tempered and even generous philanthropist; a man who made and lost fortunes in his musical enterprises; the owner of a good art collection, including some Rembrandt paintings; one of the greatest organists and harpsichord players of his day; a man with a simple, uncomplicated faith and an equally simple and uncomplicated view towards life.

—Harold C. Schoenberg

Handel

Handel's music is, in many ways, more accessible than Bach's: easier to understand, more direct in statement, less complex, more strongly melodic and virile. He did not have Bach's harmonic ingenuity or mastery of counterpoint—who had?—but Handel's counterpoint is nevertheless confident and secure.

—Harold C. Schoenberg

Handel

A surprisingly large part of some Handel operas [and oratorios] is not original music. Audiences of Handel's day were prepared to accept his appropriations of other men's music. This has always been a touchy subject in Handel biography, and writers have turned themselves inside out trying to explain it, or apologize for it. To put it bluntly, Handel was a plagiarist, and was known as such in his own day. Early in his career he was drawing upon the music of such composers as Keiser, Graun, and Urio and passing it off as his own. From 1737, the year he became ill, Handel more and more drew on the music of other men. A list of Handel plagiarism would be appallingly large.

—Harold C. Schoenberg

Messiah

- ~ Not a typical Handel oratorio
- ~ Contemplation on prophecies of a Messiah, instead of a musical re-enactment of a biblical story.

The Première

The “Universal Spectator” review of the première:

“How will this appear to *After-Ages*, when it shall be read in History, that in such an *Age* the People of England were arriv’d to such a Height of *Impiety* and *Prophaneness*, that the most sacred *Things* were suffer’d to be us’d as *publick Diversions*, and that in a *Place*, and by *Persons*, appropriated to the Performance not only of light and vain, but too often *prophane* and *dissolute* pieces?”

Messiah

“There were Shepherds”
and
“Glory to God”

Recitative Part 1 (*Secco*)

There were shepherds abiding in the field,
keeping watch over their flock by night.

Messiah

~ “Hallelujah” Chorus

~ Tradition has it that King George II was so taken with this chorus that he stood up during its première performance.

~ To this day audiences (sometimes) stand up as a tradition.

Cantata

- ~ A work for voices and instruments
- ~ Earliest examples in Italy
 - ~ Almost always secular
 - ~ Short, lightweight entertainment

Cantata

- ~ Lutheran Chorale
 - ~ Like a 'hymn' — a harmonized melody
 - ~ Many of the melodies are old; some were even written by Luther himself.

Cantata

- ~ Lutheran Cantata
 - ~ Meant to be performed in a church service.
 - ~ The term “cantata” was not actually used in Germany.

Cantata

- ~ Bach's Cantatas
 - ~ Between 1713 and 1716 in Weimar
 - ~ Between 1723 and 1730 in Leipzig
 - ~ Wrote over 300 cantatas
 - ~ 100 of these are lost

Cantata BWV 4

~ Chorale “Christ lag in Todesbanden”

1

1

2

Christ lag in Todesbanden

Für unsre Sünd gegeben,
Er ist wieder erstanden
Und hat uns bracht das Leben;
Des wir sollen fröhlich sein,
Gott loben und ihm dankbar sein
Und singen halleluja,
Halleluja!

Christ lay in death's bonds

handed over for our sins,
he is risen again
and has brought us life
For this we should be joyful,
praise God and be thankful to him
and sing alleluia,
Alleluia!

Cantata BWV 4

- ~ The cantata sets this melody seven times, once for each movement.
- ~ Each movement has a different text.
- ~ Each movement has a different style.

Cantata BWV 4

- ~ Stanza 3: Tenor
 - ~ “Gapped” Chorale
 - ~ Each phrase is divided by an instrumental passage

Cantata BWV 4

In the *Animated Listening Chart*



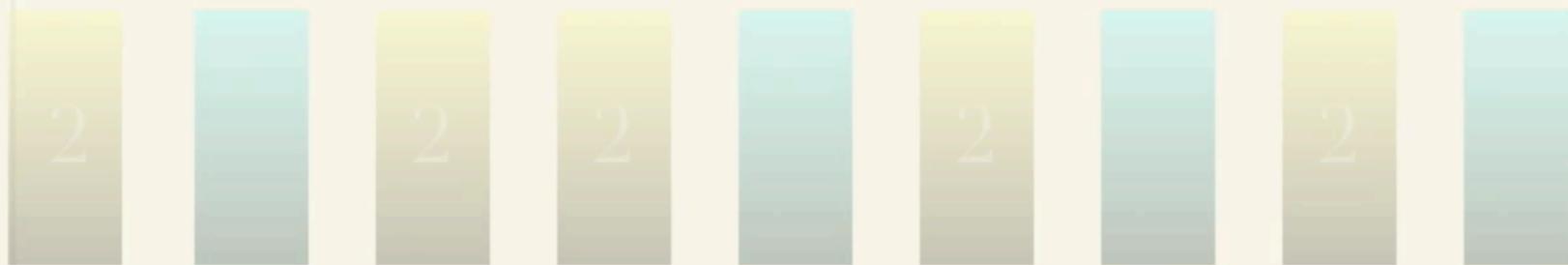
Interpolated violin passages



Chorale: musical phrase 1



Chorale: musical phrase 2



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 bleibet nichts denn Tods Gestalt,
Den Stach'l hat er verloren.
Halleluja!

Jesus Christ, God's son,
has come to our place
and has put aside our sins,
and in this way from death has taken
all his rights and his power,
here remains nothing but death's
outward form, it has lost its sting.
Alleluia!

Cantata BWV 4

- ~ Stanza 4: Alto
 - ~ “Gapped” Chorale
 - ~ The alto sings the chorale phrases relatively slowly.
 - ~ The non-chorale parts are the other voices (soprano, tenor, bass) singing in faster imitative polyphony.
 - ~ The imitative polyphony is continuous throughout the movement.



Es war ein wunderlicher Krieg,
Da Tod und Leben rungen,
Das Leben behielt den Sieg,
Es hat den Tod verschlungen.
Die Schrift hat verkündigt das,
Wie ein Tod den andern fraß,
Ein Spott aus dem Tod ist worden.
Halleluja!

It was a strange battle
where death and life struggled.
Life won the victory,
it has swallowed up death
Scripture has proclaimed
how one death ate the other,
death has become a mockery.
Alleluia!

Cantata BWV 4

- ~ Stanza 7: Chorus
 - ~ A straightforward setting of the chorale melody in 4-part harmony.

1

1

2

Wir essen und leben wohl

In rechten Osterfladen,
Der alte Sauerteig nicht soll
Sein bei dem Wort Gnaden,
Christus will die Koste sein
Und speisen die Seel allein,
Der Glaub will keins andern leben..
Halleluja!

We eat and live well

on the right Easter cakes,
the old sour-dough should not
be with the word grace,
Christ will be our food
and alone feed the soul,
faith will live in no other way.
Alleluia!

Bach's Main Vocal Works

- The Cantatas
- Mass in B Minor
- St. John Passion
- St. Matthew Passion
- Magnificat
- Christmas Oratorio
- Easter Oratorio