

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH - THE ONLY FUNERAL CANTATA IN HIS WORKS: „GOTTES ZEIT IST DIE ALLERBESTE ZEIT”, BWV 106

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SUMMARY. The funeral repertory represents a privileged field in the history of music, which reflects the deepest expression of each composer or era. Funeral music was generally approached at the end of the works or at mature moments in composing art. We generally find in this type of repertory the most obvious spiritual and compositional refinement, a climax of stylistic values in the art of each composer; a synthesis of the creativity of great artists. Bach has entered the field of funeral music only in a very small vocal portion of his vocal-symphonic repertory, small in size and means of composition: cantata *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, BWV 106. The work is part of his religious cantatas, being composed during his early years, in 1707-1708.

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1. Introduction

The funeral repertory represents a privileged field in the history of music, which reflects the deepest expression of each composer or era. Funeral music was generally approached at the end of the works or at mature moments in composing art. We generally find in this type of repertory the most obvious spiritual and compositional refinement, a climax of stylistic values in the art of each composer; a synthesis of the creativity of great artists. Drawing near to death has always inspired piety and holy fear, generally translated in art through drama, strong emotion, and inner effervescence of high spiritual fervour. “The Holy Fathers have arranged that on Saturday, there should be remembrance of the departed, because that is the day when Christ was in the tomb in body and in hell in soul, to liberate deceased righteous ones. On the other hand, Saturday points towards Sunday, the day of the Resurrection of Christ our Saviour. Remembering the deceased during wintertime marks the beginning of the Saturdays of those

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who have passed away, seven in number, that will suggestively end with the Saturday of Lazarus, before Holy Week, or the Week of Passions. For Christians, death is but a sleep and a “paschal” moment of passing or “moving” to eternal life. Therefore, all the services for the deceased are sung with “Halleluiah” which is the funeral chant of Christians”².

2. J. S. Bach, *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, BWV 106 (analytical perspectives)

Bach has entered the field of funeral music only in a very small vocal portion of his vocal-symphonic repertory, small in size and means of composition: cantata *GottesZeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, BWV 106. The work is part of his religious cantatas, being composed during his early years (not in maturity), in 1707-1708. It is made up of only four movements, being the smallest vocal-symphonic work with a funeral character, of which we know. On a textual basis, we note the focus of the author on four quotes extracted from the Old Testament: Psalms 90 (verse 12) and 30 (verse 6); the Book of Isaiah (38, 1) and the Book of Sirach (14, 17) and on four quotes from the New Testament: the Gospel of Luke (18, 31-34) and Revelation (22, 20).

The work uses the choral song *Ich hab mein Sach Gott*, being written for four vocal soloists (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) and choir, accompanied by two flute recorders, two viola da gamba and continuo (a completely poor formulation, unusual but very appropriate for rendering a funeral atmosphere).

“Researchers studying the musical works of J. S. Bach have been all too pleased to limit themselves to singular symbols and layers of symbols (reduced to cabbalistic-numeralistic or linguistically rhetorical detailed aspects of the external textual grammar) for motivic reasons in order to salvage simplifying ‘spiritual’ messages from the musical material using configurations reduced in such a way. In this respect, Bach’s cantatas and passions are still being interpreted from the point of view of proclamation; their sophisticated, compositional idiomatics and the complicated interplay between the principles of aesthetic composition as well as the theologically significant through-formatting of the musical material leave mostly in the background. The attempt to place Bach’s music in a theological setting in a comprehensive religious / historical sense which, moreover, would do justice to its special morphological status, as well as from a religious / phenomenological point of view, can hardly be detected in a deductive, historical view of piety”³.

² Makarios Simonopetritul, *Triodul explicat. Mistagogia timpului liturgic (The Explained Triodian. Mystagogy of Liturgical Time)*, 3rd edition, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 2008, p. 31.

³ Adolph, W., *Theological Aesthetics of Music as a hermeneutic Task of Post-Postmodernism*, in *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, Volume 57, Issue 4, 2015, p. 503.

Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit (God's time is the very best time) BWV 106 is known by the name of *Actus tragicus*, being composed for the funeral of the mayor of the town in which Bach lived at that moment of his youth: Mühlhausen, the author not being more than 20 years old (at the time his mother was leaving to eternal life). Bach's original manuscript was lost; perhaps this is the reason why many suspicions arose that the music could have other presumed authors.

The beginning is by an instrumental segment called Sonatina, intoned in *Molto adagio* by two alto flutes that look for one another in a tragic but smooth echo, with the violas da gamba and a continuous bass in the background. E-flat major tonality is very significant for a more detached vision, assumed in a Christian manner in the soul of the one who believes that death is a beginning and passing into eternity. Calling again the name of Our Saviour Jesus Christ is equally significant.

E.g. 1

SONATINA.
Molto Adagio.

Flauto I.

Flauto II.

Viola da gamba I.

Viola da gamba II.

Continuo.

J. S. Bach, *GottesZeitist die allerbesteZeit*, BWV 106

From a semantical point of view, the repeated throb of an eighth note is of great importance (especially that in the basso continuo voice) for it creates an atmosphere of piety and inner silence necessary for drawing close to death from a Christian perspective. In bars seven-eight, the flute engages in a sort of dialogue with echoes (canon) intoned on a slightly modulated tract; an original way of suggesting the idea of going far, serenity, with a certain stereophony.

The second section comprises four sub-sections: *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, with an original poetical text that shows the soul's moment of preparation in passing the threshold of eternity: God's time is the best of all times. Within this first choral moment, a segment of the type fugato Allegro intervenes, so that the fluctuation of the tempo brings an end in

Adagio (according to the first edition of his complete works in which the work was included in 1876) with the text *In ihm sterben wir zu rechter Zeit* (In Him we will die at the right time). The phrase is significantly completed only on the final cadence (left open, as a symbol of the almighty divine wills, with the text *wenn er will / if He wishes.*) The many fluctuations in tempo, character, musical structure and text are quite unusual for the genre and for his era given the small size of the work (also, it deals with one of the most serious themes in the life of humanity.)

A quote from Psalm 90 (*Ach, Herr, lehre uns bedenken, daß wir sterben müssen* - Ah, Lord, teach us to consider that we must die) supports the second sub-section marked by an arioso of a soloist tenor voice (Lento). Several researchers have considered the Psalm as being a source of inspiration in Bach's music for his instrumental work (for instance, for *The well-tempered harpsichord*)⁴. The musical discourse is opened by an exclamation that marks an emotional way of direct addressing (*Ach, Herr! / Oh, God!*).

The third sub-section is based on an excerpt from the Book of Isaiah, which refers to preparation for death, rendered by an aria of the bass: *Bestelle dein Haus; denn du wirst sterben* (Put your house in order; for you will die) - Vivace. The last sub-section (Andante) opposes two states, two worlds that seem to answer one another: *Es ist der alte Bund: Mensch, du mußt sterben!* (It is the ancient law: human, you must die!) with a text extracted from the Book of Sirach (performed by the voices of the choir) and the higher level of the soprano voice, which intonates three times *Ja, komm, Herr Jesu, komm!* (Yes, come, Lord Jesus!). The last phrase of the soloist voice has an open ending, entirely unexpected, a cadence around which the voice remains to sing without an accompaniment, as a symbol of a last breath that leaves to eternity.

The voice of the soprano intones a solo segment made up of high embroideries and short passages in a major tone. We cannot help making a connection with the last words uttered on the threshold of death by the saints who left behind such a mysterious testimony, one of them being the greatest Romanian Orthodox theologian, father Dumitru Stăniloae who left to eternity while saying: "Let us get out of here... Take us out of here, Lord, we do not want to remain here anymore...(…) We talk about You, Lord... Let us be awake... Let us talk... Come on, Lord... Let us talk..."⁵.

⁴ Tomita, Y., *Psalm and the 'Well-tempered Clavier II': Revisiting the old question of Bach's source of inspiration*, Riemenschneider Bach Institute, USA, Volume 32, Issue 1, 2001, p. 17.

⁵ Stăniloae, Lidia, *Lumina faptei din lumina cuvântului – împreună cu tatăl meu, Dumitru Stăniloae* ("The Light of Deed from the Light of Word – together with my father, Dumitru Stăniloae), Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2018, p. 28.

The third section opens with two diatonic ascendant passages, over an octave (as symbols of resurrection and death as a passage, segments that will perpetuate throughout the soprano's intervention) and is based on texts taken from the New Testament, more precisely from the Gospel of Luke: *In deine Hände befehlich meinen Geist* (Into Your hands I commit my spirit), words uttered by our Saviour on the Cross. The simplicity of the discourse is remarkable and supports the thesis that the work is also very unusual from this point of view.

An aria of the alto voice follows immediately with a text taken from Psalm 31: *du hast mich erlöst, Herr, du getreuer Gott* (You have redeemed me, Lord, faithful God). Inserted after this short sub-section, we note the answer offered by our Crucified Saviour to the good thief who repented, as a promise of happy eternity: *Heute wirst du mit mir im Paradies sein* (Today you will be with Me in Paradise). The end of this segment is overlapped with a choral of alto solo voice on the lyrics: *Mit Fried and Freud ich fahr dahin*, a Luther hymn of 1524 paraphrasing Simeon's song receiving the Savior in his arms); the anthem was used by Bach in cantata BWV 125.

The last section is strictly choral (*Glorie, Lob, Ehr und Herrlichkeit*" - Glory, praise, honor, and majesty), having a regular final character for vocal-symphonic works of this type. A symmetry act is also produced when echoes from the initial Sonatina re-occur, followed by a double fugue on the word: Amen (Allegro).

3. Conclusion

"...nomination of ritually organizing the stimulus of expression, justified by the deep religiosity of the composer and direct support of him in the adopted Lutheran life melodies of hymns in the analysis of works of Bach. The latter capture in the artistic whole the moral and behavioral complex, which is indicative for the Lutheran-Pietist, and which has a collision with the Orthodox ethics of the joy of perception of the world as the basis for moral orientation in the world"⁶.

The work presents the Christian vision on death as passage unto the Kingdom of eternity, not as a dramatic ending: the first part renders the defining of death in the Old Testament, and the second one in the New Testament. The short duration (less than half an hour) and getting close to the moment of his mother's passing to eternity justify the opinion according

⁶Volkova, G., *Ontological Aspect of Familiarizing with the Creative Work of J.S. Bach and to the Symbolism of Spiritual Christian Music*, in National Academy of Managerial Staff of Culture and Arts Herald, Issue 3, 2018, p. 383.

to which the completely special character for a funeral vocal-symphonic music would be due to these arguments. Another original aspect is that Bach performs very fluent passages between the subsections of the four sections, so that an impression of continuity is created (although it does not exist in the score): here is another sign of maturity, of modernity offered by the author at a very young age.

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