

## **Bach Cantata, *Bereitet die Wege, bereitet die Bahn*, BWV 132**

22<sup>nd</sup> December 1715. Dominica 4ta Adventus Xti. 'Concerto'

Epistle: Philippians 4, 4-7 (Rejoice in the Lord always.) Gospel: St John 1, 19-28 (This is the record of John [The Baptist].)

Dürr i/104. Whittaker i/90 Spitta (English Edition) i/557

BG 28 p. 31. NBA 1 p 101. Bärenreiter CC 1 p 123. Kalmus 37.

Richter 1/1 1972 Rilling 1976 Harmoncourt 3/11 1983 Koopman 2/2 1995 Suzuki 7 1998 Leusink III/3 2001

Kuijken 9 2009

*Bereitet die Wege, bereitet die Bahn* [Prepare ye the highway, prepare ye the path], a radiantly virtuosic cantata for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, dates from 1715, and reflects Bach's decisive stylistic shift from the somewhat archaic Northern European severity of his earlier cantatas towards the warmer Italianate idiom which would inform his Leipzig masterpieces.

From 1708-1717, Bach worked at the court of Duke Wilhelm Ernst, who resided at the imposing Wilhelmsburg in Weimar. The strictly Lutheran court was highly regulated and the atmosphere oppressive; it was also beset by simmering tensions between Duke Wilhelm and his co-ruler, Duke Ernst August, who lived nearby at the Rotes Schloß. Duke Wilhelm took a keen personal interest in both theology and music, and he recruited several instrumentalists to augment the chapel forces.<sup>1</sup> Bach, with his love of order and structure, may, initially at least, have found this tightly regulated world artistically congenial. As Bach's great biographer, Phillip Spitta commented, 'no more favourable spot could have been imagined for Bach and his great aims'.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, Bach was well paid, the organ was refurbished to his specification (a row of bells was added, among other stops) and he was surrounded by brilliant colleagues (including the influential poet Salomo Franck) and talented students. Also from these years come many of the large-scale organ works and the extraordinarily intense chorale settings collected in the *Orgelbüchlein*.

The Weimar chapel in which Bach worked was destroyed in the fire of 1774, but from descriptions and a painting, it was unusually impressive.<sup>3</sup> Known as the Himmelsburg [Castle of Heaven], the chapel incorporated a remarkable organ loft, situated high up in the third storey, from whence the heavenly music radiated down to the listeners below. The musicians in the organ gallery probably performed in cramped conditions, and in winter it was extremely cold.

Perhaps in response to Bach's successful application for the post of organist at the Liebfraukirche in Halle, Duke Wilhelm promoted him to Konzertmeister at Weimar, in March 1714. Among Bach's additional duties was the requirement to 'perform new works monthly'. Apparently, the musicians had taken to rehearsing at home, because, in the same

---

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent summary of the cultural context of Bach's life in Weimar, see Wolfgang Sandberger, *Bach 2000*, chapters 9 and 10, Teldec Classics International, Stuttgart 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Phillip Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, Dover Publications, New York, 1951, vol I p 378.

<sup>3</sup> For more details on the layout, including a floor plan, see Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach, The learned Musician*, Oxford, 2000, p 150 and p 159.

document, they were ordered to practise only in the chapel.<sup>4</sup> In line with his new duties, Bach began composing a remarkable series of cantatas, among them *Bereitet die Wege*, for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, 1715, which that year fell on December 22<sup>nd</sup>. During Bach's subsequent years at Leipzig, music was not required in Advent beyond the first Sunday, and BWV 132 remains the sole surviving cantata for this occasion.

The evidence for Bach's stylistic development is obscured by uncertainties over chronology and by the loss of some works and the original versions of others. However, it does seem that, in this cantata, Bach consciously looked beyond the more archaic forms and textures still evident in earlier Weimar works, such as the use of divided violas, brief introductory sinfonias, highly sectionalised movements, ground-bass accompaniments, short, intensively worked imitative and fugato sections, and an elaborate melodic counterpoint to the closing chorale.<sup>5</sup> These characteristics reflect North German practice, and, except for the ornamented chorale, can also be found in Buxtehude's cantatas. Of course, Bach recreated these antique idioms with a transcendent mastery in his Leipzig works, but for *Bereitet die Wege*, he was inspired by the newer Italian style.

Bach could have encountered the Italian style in several ways, as it was then taking Europe by storm. Johann Wilhelm Drese, Weimar's Vice-Kapellmeister and the son of the 'old' Weimar Kapellmeister, had studied in Venice, and no doubt returned full of ideas and music. Vivaldi's music was published in Amsterdam by Estienne Roger and his son-in-law, Michel-Charles Le Cène. Prince Johann Ernst (Duke Wilhelm's musically gifted nephew) had studied in nearby Utrecht and was enthused by the latest concerto style, particularly Vivaldi's epoch-making *L'Estro Armonico* concerti, Op. 3, with their bold harmonic schemes and crisply delineated ritornello structures. While in Utrecht, Prince Johann had studied the art of transcribing Italian instrumental works for keyboard. On returning to Weimar, he encouraged his teacher, Johann Walther (a distant cousin of Bach's) and Bach himself to make such transcriptions. Although the Roger and Le Cène catalogue comprised mainly instrumental music<sup>6</sup>, vocal works circulated in manuscript; Bach was probably familiar with the 'Arcadian' type of cantata, scored for solo voice and continuo, such as those of Bononcini and others.

The Italian influence on *Bereitet die Wege, bereitet die Bahn* is already evident from its title page: Bach designated the work 'Concerto á 9' and signed himself G[iovanni] S[ebastiano] Bach.<sup>7</sup> Bach's choice of instruments was not in itself unusual, but here he explores them in new ways. Previously, for example, Bach composed plangent cantilenas for the solo oboe (such as 'Seufzer, Tränen, Kummer, Not' [Sighs, tears, sorrow, need] from *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*, BWV 21; or 'Stumme Seufzer, stille Klagen' [Muted sighing, silent weeping] from *Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut*, BWV 199). In the opening aria of *Bereitet die Wege*, by contrast, the oboe leads the ensemble in a joyful dance, and competes with the soprano in a

---

<sup>4</sup> Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel rev. Wolff, *The New Bach Reader*, Norton, New York, 1998 p 71.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of 'Weimar Cantata Types', see Christoph Wolff 2000, p 166–168.

<sup>6</sup> See François Lesure *Bibliographie des Editions Musicales publiées par Estienne Roger et Michel-Charles Le Cène (Amsterdam, 1696-1743)*, Heugel, Paris 1969.

<sup>7</sup> Facsimile of title page in BG 28 p 33 and NBA IX.2 p 61.

virtuosic duet. The new style may even reflect a new type of instrument: towards the end of 1714 Bach began specifying *Hautbois* (the French name) rather than *Oboe*;<sup>8</sup> he notated its music differently (see below) and perhaps considered it more suitable for virtuosic solos.

The title page lists nine instruments and voices; it is clear from their designations that this work was conceived as chamber music (just one player or singer to each musical part) with one significant exception: the accompanying basso continuo. The list includes a violoncello and Basso per l'Organo. However, in the opening bars of the score, Bach also indicates a bassoon line with the letter F[agotto] and double stems. The bassoon largely duplicates the bass part of the first Aria; clearly Bach's aim was to reinforce the underlying harmonies and the dynamic levels, and to balance the solo oboe. Exactly how this line should be continued (from bar 22 onwards) is open to speculation. Throughout the movement, Bach specified dynamics unusually precisely, sometimes apparently to avoid swamping the main soloists (oboe and soprano) and elsewhere to suggest an 'echo' (as at the pianissimo in bar 83). It seems logical that the bassoon should drop out for these quieter moments [this is the rationale for the bassoon line in the associated score].

Only one instrumental part survives, for Violone.<sup>9</sup> Although the part is incomplete (it ends at bar 45 of movement three, the Bass aria), the fragment is nevertheless highly informative, because it reveals how the Violone line is to be extrapolated from the solo cello part, a distinction only sketchily indicated in the manuscript itself.

Thus the bass line was reinforced by at least three instruments: the organ (from the title page) the bassoon (from the score) and the violone (from the fragmentary instrumental part). Perhaps the cello also added its sonority to the accompaniment. Above this, of course, the organist improvised chords in accordance with the prevailing harmonies; occasionally, Bach has specified the required chord with figured bass numerals (e.g. bar 5 of the tenor recitative) but these are only sporadically indicated.

In all, this instrumentation might suggest a heavy, even ponderous bass sonority. Some earlier recordings reflect this. However, there remains much speculation about the actual sound quality of Bach's continuo accompaniment. Did the violone play at written pitch, or did it, like a modern double bass, sound an octave lower (16' pitch)? Was the violoncello normally an accompanying instrument, or was it 'just' a solo instrument reserved for the bass aria (movement three)? Possibly the continuo line was, in practice, less emphatic: the bassoon could be confined to the first aria, the violone could be interpreted as a viol-like instrument playing at written (8') pitch, and the violoncello could be omitted (except as a solo instrument in the third movement). The overall sound would thus become lighter and more agile, effectively balancing the nimble, dance-like quality of the melody lines.

---

<sup>8</sup> See the article 'Pitch', in *The Oxford Composer Companion: J. S. Bach* ed Malcolm Boyd, especially p 370 col 2.

<sup>9</sup> Suzuki CD vol 7 liner notes p 7–8 refers to 'violin parts', however this probably should refer to the fragmentary violone part; for details of manuscript sources, see Hans-Joachim Schulze and Christoph Wolff, *Bach Compendium*, Edition Peters, Leipzig 1985, Work A6 [BWV 132] p 58.

The text of *Bereitet die Wege* was, in common with most of Bach's Weimar cantatas, written by the Weimar court poet and consistorial secretary, Salomo Franck (1659-1725). Franck adopted the reform type of cantata text advocated by his younger contemporary, Erdman Neumeister, who defined a cantata as like 'a scene from an opera, comprising recitative and aria'. The poem had been published earlier in 1715 in the collection, *Evangelisches Andachts-Opffer* [Prayer offerings on the Gospel Reading].<sup>10</sup> The prescribed Gospel Reading (John 1, 19-28) recounts the Scribes' question, 'Who are you?', to John the Baptist, who responds with the famous quotation from the prophet Isaiah (40, 3-4), 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare ye the way of the Lord'. Appropriately for an Advent Sunday, Franck concentrates on the second part of the answer. Franck paraphrases and elaborates upon this reading, and, in the bass aria, turns the question back toward the listener: 'Who are you?', to which the response here is, 'Ask thy conscience'.

The opening movement, scored for solo soprano, oboe and strings with the basso continuo, is among the first in which Bach creates what would become his standard 'allegro' aria structure: a combination of ritornello and da capo (ABA) forms. The eighteen-bar ritornello theme introduces a joyfully lilting dance-like tune, which the soprano adopts leading to a melismatic flourish illustrating 'die Bahn' [the path]; a second melisma extends across ten bars. Notice the excited hemiola syncopation (bars 29 and 45, where a bar of 6/8 is cross-accented as though a bar of 3/4). The ritornello theme returns to complete the A section.

The shorter central section (starting on the upbeat to bar 67) begins with the theme in the bass, now in the relative minor (f# minor), together with a new ostinato counterpoint in the oboe, and a strikingly static, declamatory line in the soprano. These ideas are developed leading to c# minor, where the soprano delivers the first of three unaccompanied and imperious statements of 'Messias kömmt an!' [The Saviour arrives!], the second returns to f# minor (b 90). The third leads dramatically to D major, at which point the opening material reappears and leads back into the reprise of the A section.

A curiously dissonant phrase in bar 87 may be related to the performing pitch of this work. Of course, at times Bach did create extraordinary dissonance. In bar 93, for example, the ensemble starts on a remarkable tone-cluster comprising the notes A, B, C# and D! However, bar 87 – with A-G# in the oboe against A-G in the bass, and parallel infelicities – does not seem comparable.

The question of pitch, especially in the Weimar works, is complex. Briefly, it seems likely that the pitch of the organ was about a semitone higher than today's A=440, at A = 465; in other words, this cantata (notated in A major) would have sounded as though in B flat major. The string players could tune up to this pitch. However, the 'new' oboe or *Hautbois* was actually pitched very low, at A= 390 (so its A sounded like G). To solve this problem, Bach notated the *Hautbois* part up a minor third to C major, which, sounding a tone lower in B flat,

---

<sup>10</sup> Facsimile of Salomo Franck's published poem in W. Neumann, *Sämtliche von Johann Sebastian Bach vertonte Texte*, Leipzig 1974 p 275.



The musical shape of the bass aria is largely determined by the instrumental line. The violoncello solo is highly motivic. It begins with an ostinato ‘head motif’<sup>14</sup>, which is reiterated with echo dynamics and then strides powerfully through a circle of fifths (C#, F# B, E, A). This leads into an almost moto-perpetuo texture, in which a moving line alternates with an inverted pedal point. In bars 37–41, the circle of fifths is extraordinarily distorted to underscore the melisma on ‘hypocritical’: C#, F#, B, E, A, D (natural!) G, C#, F# (Example 2). As each chord includes a seventh, this must be a rare instance (before the jazz era) of a dominant seventh in G resolving on a dominant seventh in F# (C natural to B in bars 39– 40).

Example 2. ‘Word painting’ in bass aria b 33–42

The musical score for Example 2 consists of two staves: Bass solo and Continuo. The key signature is E major (one sharp). The time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are: "ein Kind des Zorns, ein Kind des Zorns in Sa - tans Net - ze, ein Kind des Zorns in Sa - tans Net - ze, ein falsch und heuch - le-rischer Christ, ein Kind des Zorns in".

Annotations above the Bass solo staff include: "rocking motif" (measures 33-34), "rosalia sequence (down tone)" (measures 35-36), "dim'd 3rd" (measure 35), "aug'd 6th" (measure 36), and "sequence" (measures 37-39). Chords are indicated below the Continuo staff: C# (37), F# (38), B (38), E (38), A (39), D (39), G (40), C# (40), F# (41), and F# (42).

It is worth considering how incredibly tricky this solo is. Whereas the violin solo in the fifth movement is challenging, at least it lies comfortably under the fingers and is set in the ‘violin friendly’ key of B minor. The cello solo, on the other hand, is full of awkward string crossings in the ‘uncomfortable’ key of E major. (The same type of figuration in D major or F major would have been far more straightforward.) No cellist is specifically mentioned in

<sup>14</sup> This motif was a characteristic opening gambit of organ pedal solos, though more typically in C major. See Ed. Christoph Wolff and Ton Koopman, *Die Welt der Bach Kantaten* Melzler u. Bärenreiter 1996 Vol 1 p 99–100.

the Weimar register, but only a few weeks previously Bach had composed a remarkable aria for a quartet of bass musicians: 'Lass mein Herz die Münze sein', from *Nur jedem das Seine*, BWV 163, scored for two cellos, instrumental bass and bass singer. Bach could clearly draw upon some very competent cellists when needed.

In his recording, Sigiswald Kuijken interprets this solo line as being written for a *viola da spalla* (a type of cello held as though a very large viola) and makes a convincing case for this decision.<sup>15</sup> It is thought that Bach, as Konzertmeister, directed the performances from the violin; also, on occasion, musicians swapped instruments between movements. If the 'violoncello' specified here were indeed a large viola, it might have been played by the Konzertmeister. There is a (much disputed) painting by Balthasar Denner said to show Bach, with three of his sons, in which the older musician holds a small cello – is it possible that Bach played this elaborate solo himself?

The music given to the bass voice is only obliquely related to the instrumental solo (through the octave leaps at the start, for example). Instead of participating in the thematic development, the bass sings a type of impassioned, through-composed arioso, interpreting every nuance of the text, as illustrated by an extraordinarily intense passage from b 33 (see Example 2 above). The phrase 'ein Kind des Zorns in Satans Netze' [a child of wrath in Satan's net] begins with a gentle rocking motif for 'ein Kind' [a child], this leads to a rare 'rosalia' sequence, where a phrase is repeated in exact transposition.<sup>16</sup> Thus the singer's chromatically rising line and continuo's falling harmonies immediately slide down whole tone (E to D). There is a sudden extreme sharpness on 'Zorns' [wrath, bar 35] with its preceding diminished third (G to E#) interval, and momentary augmented sixth (D to B# harmony). The unexpected flatness after 'falsch' [false] (D natural bar 43) sets in train the remarkable chromatic melisma (b 38–41) already mentioned. The vocal line contains many awkward leaps (e.g. a ninth in bar 29) and frequently lies 'within' the bounds of the solo cello (e.g. 'heuchlerischer' [hypocritical] b 44).

The music of this aria is complex, intricate and technically demanding. Perhaps Bach sought to challenge his listeners (and performers!) through the extraordinary demands of this movement, just as the poet does on a theological level. As Whittaker writes, 'Bach, in his anxiety to express all that the text implies, is apt to seek to do so at the cost of musical beauty. Yet such numbers often possess a strange fascination...'<sup>17</sup>

The alto recitative, accompanied by the strings, describes the soul's repentance and return to the baptismal vows. The mainly declamatory vocal line is underpinned by some wonderful

---

<sup>15</sup> Sigiswald Kuijken directing La Petite Band, Bach Cantatas for the complete liturgical year, Vol 9. Accent CD 25309, 2008, CD liner note p 11.

<sup>16</sup> In a tonal sequence, a melodic phrase is repeated higher or lower (usually by step) but adjusted to use the notes of the prevailing key. In a real or rosalia sequence the phrase is repeated in literal transposition. Usually, as here, the sequence involves both melody and harmony (see figured bass b 67). There is a *locus classicus* example of a rosalia sequence in the first movement of Vivaldi's Op. 3 No. 8 Concerto, bars 46–47 (E minor to D minor).

<sup>17</sup> W. Gillies Whittaker, *The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach: Sacred and Secular*, OUP 1959 vol 1 p 92.

modulations (notably the false relation, E–E# in bar 16) as it moves towards D major, in preparation for the final aria in B minor.

Bach's alto soloist was the countertenor Christian Bernhardt, for whom Bach composed some of his most expressive alto arias. The filigree violin solo – in nearly continuous demisemiquavers – probably represents the purifying 'fountain of blood and water' (in the text b 19). Bach reworks the eight-bar opening theme four times during the course of the movement. The alto takes up the head-motif in bar 9, and then sings a counterpoint, while the violin reprises the opening five bars (10-14), this is subsequently modified to cadence in D major (bar 17). Bars 6-8 of the theme are repeated as bars 21-23, modified to end in F# minor. The violin recommences the theme in A major in bar 25; it is modified to end in B minor, at which point the theme is restated in full to conclude the movement.

Franck's published poem ends with the conventional chorale verse, but the corresponding setting is missing from Bach's score. It is presumed that Bach notated this on a separate but now-lost page. In the previous month (for BWV 163, composed in November 1715) Bach had appended the instruction 'Chorale in semplice stilo' [Chorale in simple, four-part, style]; following this example, BWV 132 is customarily concluded with Bach's setting of the text, *Ertöt uns durch dein Güte* [Kill us with thy goodness], to the well-known melody, *Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn*. The version from cantata BWV 164 (also originally composed at Weimar) is usually selected, transposed to A major.

Mark Ellis

Huddersfield, November 2016

The atticbooks score of Bach's Cantata

***Bereitet die Wege, bereitet die Bahn*** BWV 132

can be downloaded from [www.atticbooks.co.uk](http://www.atticbooks.co.uk)