

Music and Divine Encounter in Bach's Christmas Oratorio

By Markus Rathey | Volume 3.1 Fall 2016

I.

Christmas and music seem to belong together. Corelli's *Christmas Concerto*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, and the Christmas sections from Handel's *Messiah* are an integral part of the public and private soundscapes between Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve. They belong to the feast like roasted chestnuts and peppermint sticks. The soothing sound of the Baroque pastoral and the festive splendor of concerto-movements from the first half of the eighteenth century seem to capture the Christmas spirit and are often appreciated even without a deeper knowledge of classical music. What is more, Christmas is probably the only Christian feast that has developed its own unmistakable musical idiom: triple meter, simple texture, slow harmonic rhythm, organ points—these are not only the ingredients for a musical pastoral but they likewise characterize a wide array of popular Christmas songs, from “In dulci jubilo” to “Silent Night.”

Even in a society like ours, where communal singing has lost most of its former significance, Christmas carols still count among the best-known songs with religious texts. This phenomenon is due in part to cultural conventions; but throughout history, Christmas has also inspired musical imagination more than any other Christian feast. Paintings of the Nativity in the Renaissance and the Baroque frequently feature angels with instruments (often string instruments such as viola da gambas or violins), and the shepherds are often depicted bringing their flutes and reed instruments to the manger to play their simple tunes for the newborn Christ.^[1]

When Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) composed his *Christmas Oratorio* for the Christmas season 1734/35, he tackled a very ambitious project. The liturgy in his Leipzig churches did not provide a place to perform a piece of more than two hours in length. Bach therefore decided to split the oratorio into six separate parts, each of them to be performed before the sermon in morning services of one of the two major churches in Leipzig.^[2] The first three parts were performed on the first, second, and third days of Christmas (Dec. 25–27), Part IV on New Year's Day, Part V on the Sunday after New Year's, and the last part on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 1735. The text for the oratorio features the familiar Christmas narrative from Lk. 2, the story of the Three Wise Men from Mt. 2, as well as free poetry and hymns.

II.

With this composition Bach not only tapped into a long history of music for the celebration of the birth of Christ, he also created a celebration of music itself and of music as a mode of human and divine encounter. Music as a theme features prominently in the second part of the oratorio, performed on December 26, 1734 in the St. Thomas Church. The scriptural basis for the second part is the encounter of the shepherds with the angels on the fields before Bethlehem (Lk. 2:8–14), culminating in the angelic song “Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe” (May honor be to God on high).^[3] The festive setting of the praise of the angels is the climax of Part II, only followed by a short recitative for bass and a final chorale stanza.

Already in the opening movement for Part II, however, Bach celebrates the encounter between the angels and the shepherds, albeit without words, only with the use of music. An instrumental sinfonia depicts the bucolic scene in the fields close to Bethlehem. Bach plays with a common stereotype of shepherds' music, the *pastorale*: lilting motives in triple meter over a simple, often static, bass. However, the opening sinfonia is more than just a musical genre painting, it describes an encounter. Bach uses the string instruments of the orchestra (here doubled by the flutes) to depict the arrival of the angels. His listeners would have been familiar with paintings that associated the sound of the strings with the divine messengers. The shepherds, on the other hand, are represented by the nasal sound of the oboes—again a typical feature in Baroque iconography.^[4] At the beginning of his sinfonia, Bach juxtaposes these two sonic groups: the strings begin, then they are interrupted by the oboes, then the strings take the lead again, and so forth. Each group also has its unique musical ideas. The angels play an elegantly flowing *siciliano* motive, while the shepherds interject with a simpler, more rustic theme. Gradually, however, the oboes adopt musical ideas from the strings, and in the final moments of the sinfonia, the strings and oboes play the same motive. In the last two measures, the strings even drop out and the oboes of the shepherds play the angelic motive all by themselves.^[5] Symbolically speaking, the angels serve as a model for the music of the shepherds. Bach's skillful juxtaposition and assimilation of musical ideas and musical topoi correlates with Martin Luther's interpretation of the angelic choir in Lk. 2. In his *Hauspostille* the Reformer states that through the birth of Christ, humans become co-citizens with the angels: "But he is not only our Lord, but he is also the Lord of the angels; and together with the angels we are members of the Lord's domestic community. While we had been servants of the devil before, now the Child has honored us by elevating us to the citizenry of the angels. They are now our best friends. . . ."^[6] A theological treatise from 1746 formulates this synthesis thus: "In Christo und durch Christum stimmen himmel und erde, Gott, Engel und menschen wieder zusammen."^[7] (In Christ and through Christ heaven and earth, God, angel, and men sound together). Bach's sinfonia enacts this synthesis musically by leading the two musical choirs, which are distinct in motive and color, to a sonic synthesis.

Bach envisions the angels and the shepherds as two "choirs," two musical ensembles, which engage in a dialogue. This idea also shapes the following movements of Part II of the oratorio. After the announcement of Jesus's birth, the text of the following recitative even calls the shepherds a "choir": "What God has pledged to Abraham, he now lets be shown to the chorus of shepherds as fulfilled" (no. 14).

The angel then urges the shepherds to go to the manger and to see "the miracle" that has taken place. But again, the shepherds do not only appear as passive bystanders but the angel also encourages them to sing a lullaby for the newborn Child: "Then sing for him by his cradle—in a sweet tone and with united choir—this lullaby" (no. 18).^[8]

While the biblical narrative expects the angels to sing their angelic *Gloria*, nowhere do we read in the Gospel of Luke that the shepherds made music as well. However, for Bach and his anonymous librettist there is no question but that the encounter would have a musical component. If the angels are singing, the shepherds have to be imagined as following their example by singing, as well.

The lullaby that follows is a beautiful alto aria, which meditates on the intimate relationship between the believer and Jesus: "Sleep, my most beloved, enjoy your rest . . . refresh your breast, feel the delight" (no. 19). The music of the alto aria is soothing, with a lilting rhythm. It fits the stereotype of a lullaby.

The shepherds encounter the message of Jesus's birth in music and their first response is music. The encounter between the human and divine spheres takes place in sound. The theological synthesis is also musical synthesis. Harmony between God and man is represented by musical harmony.

III.

After the alto lullaby, the Evangelist announces the arrival of the heavenly hosts, and the angels sing their "May honor be to God on high," the angelic *Gloria*. Bach divides the text of the heavenly chorus into three sections: the praise of God on high, the peace on earth, and the great pleasure to humankind. As he had already done in the opening sinfonia, Bach establishes a juxtaposition between the divine sphere in the first section and the human sphere in the second section; in the third section, he leads these two spheres to a synthesis by combining musical ideas from the first two sections. Bach essentially follows the same pattern he had already used in the opening sinfonia, now applied to a setting of the central biblical text.

The angelic *Gloria* is followed by a small recitative, sung by the bass voice, which connects the praise of the angels with the human response. The focus is no longer only on the shepherds; it is wider. It is the call to all mankind to join the choir of angels: "Quite right, you angels: shout and sing. . . . Arise then! We will join with you in song." The text for the recitative finally spells out what the music had already represented several times, the combination of heavenly and human forces in the musical praise of God.

The second part of the oratorio (like the other parts as well), ends with a setting of a common congregational hymn. Even though the hymn was here to be sung by the choir, hymn settings like this commonly represented the voice of the congregation in Bach's oratorios. This is the case here as well. In the hymn setting the singers join the angels and praise the newborn Son of God: "We sing to you, amid your host, with all our power . . . that you, O long-desired guest, have now presented yourself" (no. 23). The hymn setting is accompanied by the instruments, and we hear again the musical motives from the opening sinfonia, as well as the intricate juxtaposition of strings (now playing together with the voices) and the nasal sound of the oboes.

IV.

Traces of a similar view of music can also be found in other movements of the oratorio, albeit not as concentrated as in Part II. Already the opening movement of the oratorio begins with the praise of God through music: "Shout, exult, arise, praise the days [of Christmas]. . . . Break forth into song, full of shouting and rejoicing" (no. 1). But again, even before the voices of the singers enter, Bach has already displayed the different voices of the orchestra in fanfares of praise: first the drums, then the flutes, followed by the oboes and the trumpets. When the singers finally enter in measure 33, their "Shout, exult, arise" almost feels redundant, because that is exactly what the instruments have already done for quite a while. The opening chorus is a celebration of music as a means of expressing the joy that will later be announced by the angels in the *Gloria*. The same is true for the opening movement of the third part of the oratorio: "Ruler of heaven, give heed to our babble, let our feeble songs praise you" (no. 24). Music—here the songs and psalms sung in the honor of God—serves as a celebration of the birth of Jesus. Even though the text does not mention it directly, the divine praise from the human chorus is again modeled on the praise sung by the angels. The students of the St. Thomas School who sang the work in 1734/35 would have been familiar with this idea. The laws for the school (*Schulordnung*), recently revised in 1733, described the musical duties of the pupils by comparing them to a choir of angels: "When they are singing, they shall diligently remember the nature and the duties of the holy

angels; this shall teach them that the singing of sacred songs is a glorious duty and how they should behave honorably while singing these songs.”[\[9\]](#)

For Bach and his contemporaries, Christmas music was not only a way to set a sentimental mood, not only the celebration of a “Silent Night” or the sonic memory of jingling bells. It was a means of encounter with God. Earthly music was a reflection of heavenly music; the voices of the human choir emulated the angelic voices. The goal was a sonic and spiritual harmony between heaven and earth.[\[10\]](#) Music was part of how God revealed himself in the Christmas narrative, and it was at the same time a human answer: praise for the coming of Christ but also the expression of love and affection in the lullaby sung for the baby in the manger, “Sleep, my most beloved. . . . Feel the delight.”



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FOOTNOTES

[\[1\]](#) For an excellent overview of music and angels see Meredith J. Gill, *Angels and the Order of Heaven in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), especially pages 112-134.

[\[2\]](#) Some of the parts were also repeated during the Vespers services; for the liturgical context see Markus Rathey, *Johann Sebastian Bach’s Christmas Oratorio: Music, Theology, Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 120-125.

[\[3\]](#) The translations of the texts from Bach’s oratorio follow the excellent translation by Michael Marissen, *Bach’s Oratorios: The Parallel German-English Texts with Annotations* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[\[4\]](#) Cf. Emanuel Winternitz, *Musical Instruments and Their Symbolism in Western Art: Studies in Musical Iconology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 132-134.

[\[5\]](#) For a more detailed discussion of this movement see Rathey, *Bach’s Christmas Oratorio*, 197-207.

[\[6\]](#) For the original text see Rathey, *Bach’s Christmas Oratorio*, 206.

[\[7\]](#) Christoph Starke, *Synopsis Bibliothecae Exegeticae in Novum Testamentum: Kurzgefasster Auszug Der gründlichsten und nutzbarsten Auslegungen über alle Bücher Neues Testaments*, vol. I, Biel: Heilmann, 1746, col. 1039.

[\[8\]](#) For the function of the lullaby and the emotional understanding of Christmas in Bach’s time see the

chapter "From Love Song to Lullaby" in Markus Rathey, *Bach's Major Vocal Works: Music, Drama, Liturgy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 2016.

[9] *Gesetze der Schule zu S. Thomae* (Leipzig:Breitkopf, 1733), 5. For an English translation and remarks on the theological and musicological context of this view of music see Rathey, *Bach's Christmas Oratorio*, 191.

[10] The idea of heavenly harmony and its sonic realization in earthly music was quite common in Baroque music theory as well as in theology; for a recent study of these concepts see Joyce I. Irvin, *Foretastes of Heaven in Lutheran Church Music Tradition: Johann Mattheson and Christoph Raupach on Music in Time and Eternity*, (Lanham: Rowman&Littlefield), 2015.

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