

vocation, liberal learning, and Bach's *Cantata 131*: a prelude to listening

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This paper was presented prior to a performance of Bach's Cantata 131 in the Valparaiso University Chapel of the Resurrection on October 21, 2002. Readers are encouraged to listen to a recording of the cantata in conjunction with this essay, say, John Eliot Gardiner's splendid 1993 recording of the work (Elektra/Asylum-#45988).

MY TEN-YEAR-OLD SON ACCIDENTALLY FELL into the middle of the Mississippi River last August. He is not the greatest swimmer in the world, was fully clothed at the time, and, upon falling in, went straight to the bottom. His younger sister and I were the only ones present. We both laughed and watched him struggle toward dry land; the thought of helping never crossed our minds.

I would feel more guilt about all of this if not for one important fact: this incident happened during a family vacation to Lake Itasca, in northern Minnesota. A little creek that flows out of this lake is generally accepted as the starting point of the Mississippi River. In the process of crossing this creek on stepping stones my son fell in. At that point, that Old Man River had been rolling along for approximately eighteen inches. It was about twelve feet wide and less than a foot deep. My son stayed dry above his knees.

Beginnings are important places, and we interact with them in peculiar ways, as Lake Itasca's very name suggests. Explorer Henry Rowe Schoolcraft became, in 1832, one of the first people of European descent to set eyes on the lake where the Mississippi began. In consultation with a better-educated missionary friend, Schoolcraft fabricated a name for the lake—"Itasca"—from the middle letters in the phrase "*veritas caput*" ("true head"), thus referring less to the body of water that sat there than the river that there found its start. Future generations would go on to erect a big plaque at the headwaters themselves, to take pic-

tures of famous people standing by the plaque, and eventually to set up a parking lot with vending machines and a visitor's center.

Bach's *Cantata 131* is just this kind of beginning, or very nearly so. And scholars have lavished on it much the same kind of attention the headwaters of the Mississippi have enjoyed. Bach would generate over two hundred cantatas in his life, tossing them off almost weekly during certain extended periods in his career. It takes longer to listen to all of Bach's cantatas than all of Wagner's operas, or Mahler's symphonies, or Haydn's string quartets. And *Aus Der Tiefe* is believed by many to be the very first. Penned as it was by a man at roughly the age of the undergraduates I deal with daily in my work as an educator, the piece seems to lend itself generously to reflections on themes of vocation and liberal learning. The discussion that follows, intended as a prelude to a listening, gives voice to some such reflections.

The circumstances surrounding Bach's entry into the realm of cantata composition are dramatic in themselves. On Easter, 1707—that was April 24—Bach auditioned for the position of organist at St. Blasius Church in the town of Mülhausen. He was 22 years old. Not particularly well known as a composer, Bach had developed a reputation as a stellar talent at the keyboard, though prone to an improvisatory excessiveness that baffled some congregants.

On May 27, about a month after his audition, the council agreed to offer him the job. Three days after that, on May 30, a fire swept through Mülhausen, destroying around a quarter of the town. Evidence suggests that *Cantata 131* was written shortly after Bach's arrival in town a few weeks later; a note at the bottom of his autograph score indicates that it was composed at the request of Georg Christian Eilmar, the pastor at the nearby Church of Mary. Eilmar probably had

a hand in the selection of the text, too, and some have conjectured that the piece might have been premiered in a special service of mourning held in Eilmar's church. That, at least, is the picture that seems most likely.

There is a lesson even here—worth noting at least in passing—for the 21- and 22-year-olds many of us interact with daily. It is hardly going too far to say that the composition of cantatas turned out to be at the core of Bach's compositional calling, but it is a calling that seems to have reached him first by historical accident. This is how it often is with callings.

CANTATA 131 IS A COMPLETE SETTING OF PSALM 130. Musically, it is divided into five movements, though the score suggests that these five are probably intended to be performed back to back, as a continuous whole. Movements one, three, and five are for a full chorus and small orchestra. Movements two and four are arias for bass and tenor, respectively. Each of these two arias features an interpolated verse from Bartholomäus Ringwaldt's hymn for Lent, "*Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut.*" These hymn verses—one of the cantata's most haunting features—are deposited in female voices in long, even note values over the arias.

The cantata is stunningly assured for the work of a 22-year-old. Moment by moment, measure by measure, we spend much of its length feeling the familiar ground of Bach's later style under our feet. But there are signs of uncertainty, too, and signs that Bach had not arrived at a sure sense of what was worth retaining among his predecessors' work and what was worth dispensing with. The choral movements—the first, third, and fifth—all involve one or two drastic tempo changes, reflecting critical contrasts in the text. Though well in keeping with seventeenth-century text-painting customs, tempo contrasts of this kind tend to work against the sense that each movement constitutes a musical whole; it is a practice Bach would largely abandon in later cantatas. At the same time, those familiar with Bach's mature fugal style will wait in vain for the first movement to burst into a full-blown fugue. The later section of this movement skirts around the idea of fugue, and plenty of more or less fugal counterpoint happens, but Bach had not yet arrived at the fugal processes to which he was so

resolutely committed in his later work. For all the beauty of the second movement, it is not at all clear what Bach is trying to get across in much of the bass and oboe's bustling figuration toward the end.

We sense the hand of the nervous student even in the appearance of the final manuscript that Bach himself prepared for this piece, and one peculiarity of this score bears pointing to here. For each of the cantata's five movements, Bach decided at the outset how many measures he would fit into each line of music on the page. Then he took straight-edge in hand and neatly penned out the bar lines for the entire movement ahead of time, all marching with mathematical precision across the page. What this means, though, is that these rigidly spaced measures are squeezed to bursting with notes during particularly active passages, and stand almost vacant during periods of less activity. This peculiar visual rhythm of the score itself reminds us of nothing so much as a kindergartener learning how to color in the lines. The relationship between imagination and law still feels like a negotiation, like a balancing act, rather than the seamless symbiosis that it quickly becomes in Bach's mature work.

But, as one might expect, there is much more to praise here than to criticize. I might point, for example, to the way that the last three movements of the piece work together to form a musical drama of descent and glorious elevation. The third movement's words, "my spirit waits and hopes," are set to a falling fugal subject of heart-breaking despondence; these words pile up on one another to create a sense of almost eternal downward motion. The fourth and fifth movements both offer a dramatic counterweight to this movement through a preoccupation with rising subjects.

GIVEN THE ROLE THAT CHORALES WOULD continue to play in Bach's cantatas, and the endless creativity he brought to their inclusion, it is hardly surprising that his use of the chorale verses in the second and fourth movements of *Cantata 131* are among the subtlest, most finely wrought effects of the piece. He was hardly the first to incorporate chorales this way. Indeed, the style he applies here harkens back to the rather old-fashioned way Johann Pachelbel had of incorporating chorales into contrapuntal organ works. At the same time,

numerous earlier composers of vocal music—including Bach’s uncle, Johann Christoph—had occasionally sought to juxtapose biblical words with appropriate hymns. But in Bach’s hands, the process takes on a theological dynamism it had rarely had before him. This is particularly true of the first chorale verse, laid over the bass aria of the second movement. The Psalm text entrusted to the bass in this movement seems to offer the hope of forgiveness, only somewhat enigmatically to withdraw it in the same breath: “but with you, there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.” Musically, these lines are worried half to death with incessant, seemingly pointless figuration. The long, even notes in which the soprano intones the chorale over this aria seem to speak from another world altogether. Which, indeed, they do: a world in which God’s capacity for forgiveness is no longer held out as a fleeting possibility, but as a matter of the historical record: “You won atonement for me on the cross, with pains of death.”

Scholars of Bach’s cantatas almost invariably approach the issue of the chorale the same way, asking questions like, “Where did Bach get the idea to use chorales in this way?” or “How does Bach’s resourcefulness in his use of chorales transform the cantata genre?” But such formulations put the masterpiece first, asking only what the chorale was able to contribute along the way. In struggling to understand what Bach is up to in *Aus der Tiefe*, I find myself wondering whether we musicologists do not tend to put this particular matter backwards, and in so doing we risk missing the whole sense of “vocation” behind this and similar works. Perhaps we should not look at Bach’s use of chorales in the cantata in terms of what he was able to plunder from the church service and put to his own higher uses. Perhaps the question is, instead, what he was struggling to teach people about the chorales they used every week. The chorale in the second movement of this cantata is the sole vehicle through which the word of the new covenant is proclaimed,

the vehicle through which the entire tragic sweep of the Psalm is transcended. It may not be going too far to suggest that at least part of Bach’s mission here was to freight the chorale itself, as a genre, with theological substance and force, to encourage people to attend in a new way to the music of which they made daily or weekly use.

BUT THIS CANTATA OFFERS US A MORE DIRECT approach than this, I think, to the issues of vocation and the role of the educator. For what we do

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as listeners when we hear this piece has a lot to do with what we do as liberal educators where vocation is concerned. We listen to this cantata with the knowledge of the greatness to come. We know what became of the cantata genre in Bach’s hands, and when we hear *Aus der Tiefe* we struggle to discern signs of these approaching marvels. There is a capacity for greatness, too, in every one of our students: for

some, this is a greatness of intellect, for others, a greatness of soul, or of industry, or of spontaneous creativity, or of humble fidelity, or of spiritual fervor. Being attuned to the early signs of greatness, as this musical work forces us to be, is much of what I think we mean by the discernment of vocation. Of course, hearing greatness in this first cantata of Bach’s is no trouble. Sensing it in the work of our students sometimes requires a bit more imagination, but is no less crucial.

I have taken a couple of different approaches here to the question of what it might mean to deliver a meditation that would be both about Bach’s *Cantata 131* and about liberal learning and vocation. I want now to suggest a broader view of all this. Because it may be the case that the most important thing that educators at large stand to learn from these remarks does not pertain all that closely to the things that I have actually said here, but to the whole format of this “prelude to lis-

tening.” Because it seems to me that putting a paper before a piece of music is a lot like putting an education before a life.

What I mean is this: I hope that your appreciation of Bach’s cantata will be enhanced by the few words I have offered about the historical environment in which it was written. I hope, too, that I have managed to draw your attention to certain structural matters that will help anchor your experience of the piece, that will help bring order to your listening. In the same way, much of the task of liberal learning is to bring a sense of context to the life that the student is about to go forth and lead and a sense of order and reason to the living of that life. But the fact is that I do not want you spending so much time pondering my own words that you abandon your capacity for naïve, unmediated enjoyment of this brilliant piece. In the same way, we do not want to encourage students to become so totally and permanently lost amid the philosophies, literatures, and sciences we put before them that they lose sight of what *living* is really all about.

What I am really trying to point at, I suppose, boils down to *humility*. We musicologists undertake our scholarly work in the constant awareness that, finally, it is not our words that matter, but the music. We love what we do, but we love the music more. The best educators I know approach their whole operation with a similar humility: the life beyond is what counts, and our work as teachers matters only in as much as we are able to draw mattering out of that life.

WITH THIS IN MIND, I WANT TO CLOSE WITH one further thought. Eleven days before this paper was first delivered, many of us watched the Space Shuttle Atlantis trundle its crew off to the International Space Station. Spectacles of this kind had a particular significance in the year 2002, for humanity had gotten its first glimpse of space travel exactly a century before. Of course, the glimpse they got in 1902 was not actual space travel, but the first science fiction movie, Georges Melies’ cele-

brated film, *A Trip to the Moon*.

The most serious scientific stumbling block back then—a snag Melies’ movie inherited from the fiction of H.G. Wells on which it was based—was that the gun had been invented but the liquid-fueled rocket had not. The spacecraft portrayed in this movie is essentially a giant inhabited bullet fired from an enormous gun, relying on muzzle velocity alone to propel it across space. I do not think I need to dwell on the absurdity of this conception (for human transport, at least) from a scientific standpoint. Nonetheless, I think that many educators, myself included, still tend to think this way sometimes about our own work. We feel that we have to cram every bit of good thinking and good reading we can into the brief span of a student’s college days, because once the students set out to make their way in the world beyond, the time for this sort of thing is over. The rest of their lives will be a gradual loss of intellectual momentum, a gradual giving in to gravitational forces of care, drudgery, wealth, disillusionment, professional specialization, of all those things we mean by “real” when we speak of the “real world” beyond college. But we are not really in the human cannonball business; we are in the astronaut business, even though we know how tragically wrong things may go there. We are at our best when we seek not to push our students with a lifetime’s worth of momentum, but to help them locate the means and the will to push themselves, to help them find that source through which momentum will only build in the years ahead.

Of course, we do not speak of rocket engines; we speak of vocations. And we do not speak of ignition, but of discernment. And the moment of ignition, that moment that we and the student together locate that initial impulse, tends to resemble less the firing of an enormous cannon than the Mississippi river’s coming unobtrusively into existence around the feet of a ten-year-old as his father looks on and smiles. ♣

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