The Christmas Oratorio:The Cradle or the Cross

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[0:00] Now let's get into something that we can all have access to, we can all comprehend and understand without working too hard with our ears, and that is the source material, text, for the text, the libretto.

Now in terms of narrative source material, Bach and his librettus drew exclusively from the second chapters of Matthew and Luke.

The fourth cantata, again, we see something rather peculiar. What is peculiar? It is drawn from just one verse, Luke 2, 21. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus.

The name given by the angels before he was conceived in the womb. This resulted in a highly meditative section. In fact, the most meditative within the entire oratorio.

As it only contains one secco-resistative movement that is seven measures in length. Or, if you really want to know, a performance time of 32 seconds out of 24 minutes and 32 seconds.

[1:13] So, 32 seconds worth of narrative, and 24 minutes worth of pondering and confessing. So, that makes it highly meditative, and surely Bach wants us to funnel our thoughts into this movement here.

Okay? Actually, furthermore, very interestingly, the entire Christmas oratorio is actually more meditative than its passion counterparts, as it contains proportionally less secco-resistative movements.

So, what very interesting is that a Christmas piece is more meditative than passions. So, Bach wants his audience to think more in Christmas than in Good Friday.

For some reason. Okay? Now, let us just zoom into the fourth cantata. Provided that the subject is on the circumcision of Jesus, we should review the meaning of the circumcision and discuss how the circumcision of our Lord is relevant to the new covenant.

In Genesis chapter 17, God commanded Abraham, This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you.

[2:42] Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised.

Every male from your generation, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised.

So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people.

He has broken my covenant. Genesis 17, 10 to 14. Thus in the old covenant, the circumcision served as a mark for God's covenanted people.

And by the way, what was the circumcision in the old testament becomes, what's in the new testament? Baptism, right? Yeah, and this is why we baptize infants.

[3:46] Okay, and also throughout the old testament prophet, God also promised the restoration of the remnant of Israel.

For example, there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. Isaiah 11, verse 1.

In Luke's gospel, the angel's announcement, the Lord God shall give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

Luke 32 to 33. Luke chapter 1, 32 to 33. It affirms that Jesus is from the line of David, i.e. the promised king. The account of circumcision, therefore, further affirms that he is part of the covenant nation, or remnant of Israel.

Therefore, Luke and his gospel took great lengths to tell his reader that this Jesus is the prophesied suit from the stump of Jesse.

[4:52] And this promise is being fulfilled by him, by the institution of the new Israel, and the promise is consummate at the cross. And by the way, please don't relate the restoration of Israel mentioned in the Old Testament, with the events of 1948.

They're not related. Joseph Ratzinger, or better known as Pope or Pope, and Mertius Benedict XVI, describe how Jesus' circumcision is related to the cross.

The eighth day is the day of circumcision, when Jesus is formally taken up into the community of the promise, extending back to Abraham.

Now he is legally a member of the people of Israel. Paul speaks of this event when he writes to the Galatians. But when the time fully come, God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might live, we might receive adoption as sons.

In addition to the circumcision, Luke expressively mentioned the naming of the child, with the name that has been foretold, Jesus, God saves. So that from the circumcision, the reader's gaze is opened up towards the fulfillment of the expectation that belongs to the essence of the covenant.

[6:21] Very beautiful, right? Very nice. I've been reading some of Joseph Ratzinger lately. It really captures things really well. And Bach intended to illustrate this relationship between the circumcision of Jesus and the cross by centering the cantata around flat key areas.

More than just creating a contrast between the oratorio as a whole, which we have previously mentioned, this setting also alludes to the flat key scenes in the St. Matthew Passion, which focuses on the suffering of the person of Christ and his inner Christ during the moments of his betrayal, capture, trial, and crucifixion.

So it's a game of association that Bach wants to play. Not just to create contrast, but to also draw his listener's memory back to the passion pieces.

Okay? It's set around the same key area. Or at least he's playing that, he's hiding that little code in his artwork. Okay. As mentioned previously, the fourth cantata is the most meditative in the entire oratorio.

One of the reasons for composing such highly meditative section is to draw the congregation into pondering the central message of the scriptural passage.

[7:53] That is, the relationship between the circumcision and the cross in the context of incarnation. examining the structure within the cantata section, we notice that it begins with a chorus of adoration, fall down with thanks, leading to the confession of faith through three meditative movements.

the cantata opens with a chorus expressing the response of a seeker, but before the presence of God's throne of glory.

which is almost like alluding to Isaiah chapter 6 and Revelations 4. Fall down with thanks, fall down with praise before the mercy seat of the Most High.

So fill yourself in Isaiah's shoe at the moment of Isaiah chapter 6, and this could be or should be what's going through his head.

Right? Okay. That's... Okay. And it concludes with an aria of personal confession, I will only glorify thee, and a final chorus of congregational confession, Jesus direct my beginning.

[9:17] Now the process that leads to the confessional conclusion is through these three meditative movements, which forms a sort of a chiasmus.

So you have a central idea here, flanked by two sections. Okay. The outer movements are duets or solo duets in one part singing a company resuscitif, and the other four singing an arioso.

Somewhere between a resuscitif and an aria. So you can think of it as a spectrum here. The driest being the second resuscitif, the sort of the most emotional and developing the aria.

So arioso is somewhere in the spectrum between resuscitif and the aria. Think of it as something like that. Depicting a dialogue between the seeker and the church, these outer movements reflect on the name of Jesus.

The resuscitif voice displayed in normal text. You don't see normal text. I think it's harder to see here because something's wrong with the VGA card and it's projecting doubles. But these are the normal text.

[10:40] The other voice, singing simultaneously, is the arioso voice displayed here in bolded text.

Whose melody for both movements is based on two parts of the same chorale, represents the church. This is how Bach ensures that his audience connects these two movements together.

So what is happening is the bolded text are sung in arioso and the melody of which, for both movements, are from the same chorale. So part A of the chorale is used here in movement three.

Part B of the chorale is used here in movement five. And singing simultaneously is a resuscitif voice. So sort of weaved in together. So let's get a taste of this by listening to the duet section of Emmanuel or How Sweet Word right here.

Just listen to the effect there. how young is being noise that helping get ■■ slab and unmute and unmute. One time is a passing of over a process.

[11:53] Thank you, for demonstrating as parental Okay.

You can hear how the two voices sort of weave. The soprano voice is more song-like. The baritone. Is it baritone? I think it's baritone. It's more speech-like.

Okay. Yeah, this company bar orchestra is not entirely dry like bones. Okay. So the third movement here, Emmanuel, O Sweet Word, opens with a reference to the opening of John's Gospel, which first we also have memorized because we're doing John, right?

In the beginning was the word. And as the movement unfolds, and leading towards the central movement of the cantata section, remember there's movement four here we're missing, as it unfolds and it leads on to movement four, it sort of progressed into the theme of death.

It makes a reference on the cross, the only reference in the entire Christmas piece about the cross. Now, think about it. Christmas, you mentioned about the cross.

[13:30] And then at the end of the movement, it's all about the theme of death. And actually, not just that, not just the text is about the theme of death, it actually ends on C minor.

Sorry. I woke everyone up just because I turned up the volume there, and I need to turn it down here. Is that better? Here we go. C minor.

Now, let's put it in context here. The piece, entire oratorio itself, is in D major. And all of a sudden, well, it's not all of a sudden, because the fourth cantata is in the key of F, things changed a little.

And then, at the end of this third movement, with death lingering here in the listener's mind, it ends on here.

So, all of a sudden, everything became dark. Right? Became dark. As we go towards the middle meditative section.

[14:36] Okay? And of course, the pondering of the name of Jesus picks itself up in movement five. Okay? But it just makes a little intermission to really ponder on things.

Okay? And that brings us to the center of the chiasmus. The fourth movement is at the heart of this meditative section in the fourth cantata.

Remember, it's the most, also the most meditative section of the entire piece. So, both locally and globally, this is where Bach wants us to really ponder.

And not surprisingly, he's pondering on the theme of death, but the result of the theme of death is what he wants to get into. Because, well, when this, at the start of this movement, actually, we left off here.

At the start of this movement, it went back to a key of C major. So, it gives some light to, okay, we are in this very dark area.

[15:43] Now, it gives a little more light to it. And what does it reflect? It reflects on the question whether Jesus' name inspired even the very smallest seed of severe terror.

Reflecting into the old, referring to the old Adam within man, the legacy of the fall, which is now eradicated through faith in Christ. My Savior, does thy name instill is what is known as an echo aria, in which a treble voice is placed at a distance to sing echoes of the main soprano line.

And we can listen to this. People say a picture is worth a thousand words, and I would say a musical excerpt is actually worth a thousand pictures because I can never, ever draw that, never, ever create, describe that in words.

So, let's listen to what I mean by echo aria. There's a volume problem.

Hmm. videos As as Thank you.

[17:59] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. That's the echo.

That's the echo. Okay. So we got it, right?

Now, why is this important? It's because this aria is actually a parody or borrowing of an earlier secular cantata by Bach, which he wrote for celebrating the birthday of Elector Friedrich Christian in September of 1733.

[19:49] Remember, the Christmas oratorio is written in 1734. So at one year or even less than a year before. Okay. Okay. And the secular piece is called Heracles at the Crossroad.

I tend to pronounce Heracles as in Greek mythology tradition. The name actually means the glory of Hera.

And Hercules, I believe, yes. It's the Anglicized version of the Latin name. So, yeah. So I would, just a little sign of Heracles I would be referring, I would like you to say.

Okay. Now, in the Heraclean piece, Bach utilizes the same compositional device, the echo aria, to depict Heracles seeking the virtue for guidance.

So, in other words, Bach here parodies his own work to transform it into a dialogue between Christ, replacing the virtuous part, and the seeker replacing Heracles part, as the seeker meditates and internalizes the assurance of salvation.

[21:05] Is that good? Yeah. So, therefore, by using both musical and textual devices, Bach, in the fourth cantata of the Christmas oratorio, was able to focus his audience to the idea that Pope Benedict wrote.

That from the circumcision, the reader's gaze is opened up towards the fulfillment of the expectation that belongs to the essence of the covenant. And yes, you heard it from me.

An 18th century Lutheran is in agreement with a Roman Catholic Pope. So much for that, eh? Okay.

It's very ecumenical, you see. Okay. Now let us move to the chorale movements. In the entire Christmas oratorio, there are a total of 14 chorales.

The bookends are a subject of discussion. Okay? The very first, one in the near beginning, one at the very end. Now, one at the beginning, the very first chorale, is in the fifth movement of the oratorio.

[22:20] German name is up here, and again, I'm not going to attempt it because I'm going to butcher it. So English translates to, how shall I receive thee? Now, what I'm going to do is, I'm going to now play two chorale movements.

One from the Christmas, and one from somewhere else. And you're going to have to tell me which one is the Christmas one. Here's the first one. Here's the first one.

This is the first one.

Wow. Hmm. Okay, that's the first piece.

That's the first chorale. And here's the second one. The first one.

[24:23] The first one.

I don't know what's wrong with technology today. They shouldn't have to contact us. But anyways, so anyone want to venture a guess? Which one's the Christmas one? Number two.

Number two. Good. It's the orchestrated one, okay? And Ed didn't say anything. No. I think he knows the answer. Even before I play, he knows what I'm going to do, right?

Yes. It's the orchestrated one. The orchestrated one is called, is How Shall I Receive Thee? And the other one is When Must I Depart from St. Matthew Passion?

Now, listening to both movements, we recognize that they are both set on the same Passion Chorale tune, which we know as, O Sacred Head Now Wounded. In the St. Matthew Passion, which, remember, is only seven years before the Christmas, this chorale melody was used in five out of fifteen of its chorale movements.

[25:51] And each of these movements is harmonized slightly different. So we got five, it was used five times in the St. Matthew, but each one has a slightly different harmony to it.

The one we just heard, When Must I Depart? Okay? It's actually placed immediately after the death of Jesus. Okay?

Now, in the Christmas Oratorio, the chorale, How Shall I Receive Thee? is actually harmonized very similarly to this one in the St. Matthew.

So there's an association game that Bach wants to play. Now, how do I know that they are, that they are harmonized very similarly? Well, there's two answers. There's a long answer and there's a short answer.

The long answer is this. And if you're curious about what my training is, this is what my training is about. It's called, my specialty is a Shinkirian Analysis.

[26:57] I don't think there's any, unless you're anything less than, anything, if you're anything less than a music theory nerd, this graph would not mean anything to you. So I'm not going to dwell on it.

It's only for those of us who spent hours and hours thinking about where notes go and how they're related to each other and nitpicking everything that will come up with graphs like this.

Yeah, what time wasted, eh? It's called exegeting the music. And that's exegesis going way beyond the pulpit, so to speak.

All this is saying is that what is the summary of St. Matthew and the summary of the Christmas shares the same graph, the same background structure.

Okay? They both share the same background structure. And I will leave this. Actually, if there's a Shinkirian expert here, they'll notice that there could be many flaws.

[28:03] But I haven't done this for quite a while, that's why. So let's leave it for a moment. But there's a short answer which I want to focus a little more time to because that's the one that we can sort of hear.

Okay? It's in the cadences. It's in how the piece ends. And so it takes us to the third and final music detour, which is what is the cadence?

Now, cadence, by definition, is like musical punctuations. Analogous to periods and commas in a musical phrase. There are two general types, an authentic cadence and a half cadence.

Authentic cadence sounds final, like period. Half cadence sounds like not so final, like commas. Okay? And we can illustrate it by listening to a very short phrase.

You've all heard this before, right? Yes, not. Half cadence right there.

[29:06] It's open. And there's still authentic cadence.

Sounds like the end. Okay? I can end there. I couldn't end with the first one because it's open. I can end here. Now, those who are very interested, there are actually subtypes of cadences, and there's a subtype of half cadence called the Phrygian half cadence, but we're not going to get into it due to interest of time, which is against me, due to all the technical difficulties we have been encountering.

Okay? Now, why is this important? Well, because all the chorale, all the chorales in both the oratorio and the passion that is set on, O sacred and now wounded, ends on an authentic cadence.

Supposed to do that. After all, it's the end of a chorale piece. With the exception of, which two? The two that we just heard. Okay? They end on, actually, what we call the Phrygian half cadence.

Special kind of half cadence. So, let's get our memory back. Just listen to each one again. To the end of it. Hear how it sort of opens?

[30:35] Just doesn't quite end. And here's the Christmas. The Christmas. Again, it sort of opens, right?

Now, in the case of, when must I depart? Buck intentionally closes the chorale with a Phrygian half cadence to create a sense of incompleteness.

Why is it incomplete? Because the work of South Asian is not yet finished on the cross since the resurrection must happen. That's why he said it that way. Okay? Don't think that the whole thing ended with Jesus on the cross.

There's something to look forward to. Okay? Now, so the incompleteness in the case of the St. Matthew chorale is to create a sense of expectation.

Now, in the case of How Shall I Receive Thee? The Christmas oratorial. Bach intentionally uses the passion chorale tune that shares the same background structure as the climactic chorale movement in the St. Matthew Passion to create in the listener an association between the death of Christ on the cross and the birth of Christ on the cradle.

[31:57] So Bach is playing an association game here. Sharing the same background structure ending the same way. So when the first chorale comes around on Christmas Day, on Christmas Day actually, you hear this chorale that's harmonized exactly, not exactly, very similar way.

And it ends in exactly the same way as the one they heard back in Good Friday. Okay? Okay? Okay? Okay? Okay? Okay? Okay? Okay? Okay? Okay.

So, everyone with me here? Mm-hmm. Okay. So, let us get to our last leg of this talk. The final chorale.

So, the very last chorale, the one that ends the piece, is the very finale. And in a way, it represents the complete antithesis to How Shall I Receive Thee? Now, the source of such contrast is the fact that it closes the way it's supposed to, on an authentic cadence.

And also, it's set on a major key. Now, it's a minor key piece, and it closes on a major key. So, it's as bizarre as playing Trinko Trinko like...

[33:14] Rather bizarre. You can recognize the tune, but just sort of in the wrong route here. Okay?

Okay? And actually, it's not just set in any major key. It's actually set in the key of D major, which is the most jubilant and brightest key according to common practice Baroque music.

Now, let's just listen to the effect first in the media rendition. And if you heard the piece before, you know why I want to do that. So, let me put in the notes, and let's do the notes and echo those ones.

Let's just listen to the notes. I don't usually read more notes on more than these ■■■■■ forecasts. Or, in the head, they'll be zapped out to the notes in theses of what they're going to do. Here how it ends properly, instead of that openness.

Now, the reason for the chorale selection to end the piece and the jubilant setting, so there's a sort of something just doesn't belong.

[34:44] You have a chorale that is passion and a setting that is jubilant. Somehow those two come together. The reason for such selection, such setting is twofold.

One is to portray the victory of Christ over death, devil, sin, and hell. So this Christus Victor theme running underneath.

And, of course, as the final section of the oratorio. Though it is fitting to conclude the music in a jubilant way, Bach would not let his audience mind off the gaze of the cross.

So, hence from the offset, he is both the sacrificial victim. So, in the Christmas oratorio, is Bach telling us the story of the cradle or the story of the cross?

And the answer is both. And I'll end this talk by playing the final movement. And you can enjoy, and then we can start discussion. And then we can play it a little bit repeated.

[35:59] And you can start this time because it's practise, and it can be one. And I'll end this time because of the fact that is to be missed. And I'll end this time. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.