

TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL STYLE IN THE MOTETS OF J.S. BACH

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The extant motets of Johann Sebastian Bach provide examples of Bach's distinctive composing techniques as he applied them to the traditional motet style of the Baroque period. The study is a comparison of Bach's motets to the traditional Lutheran motet style as it was known in the Baroque period and will highlight similarities as well as differences.

In the Baroque periods, the term "motet" was generally applied to a sacred composition for voices with Latin text taken from the Bible or religious poetry. This was a very broad definition for choral works which presented the text in an uninterrupted fashion and did not include solo passages, recitative or independent instrumental parts. Modern day confusion over identifying motets is due to the fact that the term was used interchangeably with concert, cantiones, concertus and cantata as well as being used for pieces that do not fall within the standard definition of the motet. Michael Praetorius, in *Syntagum Musicum*, (as quoted in Morgan) simply describes a motet as "any sacred Latin work" written for four to eight parts (1, 1). This is a broad, but simple statement, that is indicative of the thought of the time with regard to motet composition.

The development of the chorale motet in Germany in the early 17th century with simple, homophonic settings of the Lutheran chorale. The form was expanded with the use of contrapuntal treatment of each line in the chorale, addition of Biblical verse and antiphonal repetitions (1, 9). When the chorale was used as a cantus firmus it could be either the foundation for a freely composed, imitative composition or as the foundation for strict contrapuntal treatment of the upper voices (2, 12:641).

By the late 17th century the form of Lutheran chorale motets had become a clearly compound structure. The use of the term "form" is used very generally in that a form in the strict sense did not exist. Since the presentation of the text in a clear manner was the main purpose of the motet composition, composers freely used whatever structure seemed the best way to set the text. Indeed, the term "motet" is best applied to a style of composition rather than to a specific form. The compound structure of chorale motets was determined by the setting of the texts. The sections of the new text or new verses of the chorale were defined either by a cadence or, more commonly, an overlapping of musical ideas (1, 62). Other developments in the late 17th century included the shifting of the melody line from the tenor or bass to the soprano voice. This melody then provided material which was imitative in the accompanying voices (1, 59).

Another characteristic of these chorale motets was a homophonic beginning. This was in keeping with the Lutheran tradition of using the chorale as a means of edification for the congregation who were exposed to the chorale in a simple style which made it easily recognizable. The addition of polyphony was initially used as a "word-painting" device, with the return to fashion of polyphony in the late 17th and early 18th century it was also used as a means of melodic expansion. This led to a balanced combination of homophony and polyphony in the chorale motet (1, 59).

The continuo practice of the Baroque period also applied to the motet style. The term "a cappella" as used in the Baroque period means without accompaniment other than the organ (3, 2: 297). Some scholars also believe that instruments were used to double the vocal parts in pieces marked "a cappella" (4, 11). The *Florilegium Portense*, a collection of 270 simply composed Latin motets were written by German and Italian composers between 1603-1621, included a figured bass part for organ and "other musical instruments" (4, 12). Another factor which supports the idea of organ accompaniment is that the motets in the Lutheran service were not performed when the organ was silenced during Lent (5, 193).

By 1700, motets had been replaced by cantatas in the Lutheran service. Motets formerly were the main music of the service and had been sung after the offertory. By Bach's time, however, they had become either music for special occasions or served as introduction to the service following the organ prelude.

In Leipzig, where the extant motets of J.S. Bach were written, motets were used as an introduction to the main morning service and at vespers (6, 2: 597). The motets were selected from the aforementioned *Florilegium Portense* and were well-suited to their role as introductory pieces because of their simplicity and brevity. Bach was not expected to provide this -minor part of the service. Indeed, these motets were conducted by the student prefect and sung by the "motet choir", which Bach considered his second best (3, 295). These circumstances explain why none of the extant motets seem to have been written for this liturgical purpose. Some of Bach's motets can be positively identified as pieces for funeral services. The others are too lengthy and complex to have served as introductory works (6, 2: 597). It is possible that some of the motets occasionally took the place of the cantata in the service, but this would have been a rare occasion.

The motets which are the subject of this study are *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*, *Der Geist hilt unsrer Schwachheit auf*, *Jesu, meine Freude*, *Fürchte dich nicht*, *Komm, Jesu, komm* and *Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden*. (BWV Nos. 225 to 231.) Bach followed tradition in choosing his German texts from the Bible or religion poetry of the Lutheran chorales. All but one of his motets makes use of a Lutheran chorale text and the text of the exception (*Lobet den Herrn*) is taken from Martin Luther's translation of Psalm 117, which is used in its entirety and consists of the first movement of this motet. Bach adds an "Alleluja" movement as the second concluding section of the motet. This is the simplest motet in terms of structure and is the only motet written for a single choir of voices.

A more complex structure is obtained by the juxtaposition of two complementary textual ideas. In *Fürchte dich nicht*, Isaiah 41:10 and 43:1 are presented repetitiously for the first 82 measures in both choirs. The two chorale verses are then introduced in the soprano part and the writing is reduced to one chorus, whose text remains the verses from Isaiah. The scriptures from Isaiah are an uplifting reassurance that God will help and strengthen those who believe, while the two verses of the chorale represent the believer's response of trust and faith in God and an exhortation for God to lead them to heaven. The combination is particularly effective in light of the fact that this is one of the motets written for a funeral service. For Lutherans, death is not a time for sorrow, but an occasion of joy over the soul's return to its maker (1, 145). Bach chose texts which comforted the bereaved by reminding them of the happiness of the departed in God's presence.

The other example of the two texts presented at the same time is in the middle section of *Singet dem Herrn*. In this double chorus motet, the second chorus presents the chorale in a simple, homophonic harmonization. The source of the text of the first chorus is not known and it is possible Bach may have written it himself. The first chorus calls on God to help and protect the believer and is a reassurance of the blessing of God. The text of the second chorus is the third verse of Johann Kugelman's chorale "Nun lob, mein Seel" and portrays a confident belief in God's power and comfort as the believer comes to his death. This text is the only "funereal" sentiment in this motet. The source of the remainder of the words are Psalm 149:1-3, Psalm 150:2 and 6, and Psalm 103. The choice of the joyful word "Praise ye the Lord . . . Sing to the Lord a new song . . ." lead some scholars to the conclusion that this motet was composed for New Year's Day or the birthday celebration for the Elector Friederich August of Saxony (7, 179).

The motet, *Jesu, meine Freude* has been definitely proved to have been written for a funeral service but Bach chose another method of textual elucidation for this work. The text comes from five verses of the eighth chapter of Romans and all six verses of Johannes Franck's text of the chorale "Jesu, meine Freude." The eleven sections of this motet are an alternating pattern of chorale stanza and scripture verse. The scriptures here speak of Jesus Christ freeing man from sin and death. The chorale text is from the believer's point of view and praises the gifts of Jesus Christ as well as longing for his comforting spirit.

Komm, Jesu, komm makes use of two verses of a chorale but no Biblical verse or other text. The three sections of this motet for double chorus are directly related to the text. The text in the first section is typified by a yearning for Christ because of the bitterness of life. This text is set in a simple, homophonic style. The middle section is an affirmation of Christ as "the Way, the Truth and the Life" and is set in homophonic style with the addition of exuberant polyphony. In the third and final section the text speaks of the death and ascent to Heaven of the soul. The reassurance of the Lutheran faith is mirrored in the choice of a simple four-part harmonization of the chorale tune which ends this motet. This motet is an example of the balancing of homophony and polyphony that was characteristic of three chorale motets of the late Baroque period.

The technique of using the four-part chorale harmonization as the concluding section of the motet is also a characteristic of *Der Geist hilft unsrer Schwachheit auf*. Five of Bach's motets were written for double choirs and his treatment of these choirs is at variance with the prevailing practice. Typically, the use of the polychoral style called for the choirs to be divided into groups according to range. Double chorus compositions were written for one choir of low voices and one of high voices. Bach treated his choirs as equals in vocal range and difficulty (7, 180).

In regards to the question of accompaniment of the motets it is necessary to discuss the traditional service for which some of the motets were composed. In Leipzig, the funeral service began at the home of the deceased and continued to the grave site (8, 94). At both of these locations simple, Latin motets were sung and accompanied by a small portable organ (4, 11). Bach's motets were sung in the church at the commemorative service which followed the funeral at the grave site (8, 94). The rules of the St. Thomas Church forbade the use of instruments at funeral services (3, 84). Once again, however, scholars differ in respect to whether this instrumental ban extended to the organ.

A continuo part in Bach's hand exists for *Lobet den Herrn*, but the occasion for which this motet was written is not known. Likewise, a fully figured organ continuo part exists in manuscript for this motet. This motet was composed for the funeral service of the rector of the St. Thomas school and held in the university chapel which had no ban on instruments during funeral services. Schweitzer notes that there is no hint of the instrumental additions in the vocal score and concluded that Bach thought it a "matter of course" to provide instrumental parts (3, 298). Schweitzer further assumes that instrumental parts to the other motets are lost (3, 298). Ehmman states that instrumental parts to the other motets don't exist because the instrumentalists looked on the vocal parts or the motets were not performed after the funeral service in circumstances that allowed instruments (4, 13).

Further evidence that the motets were accompanied by the organ is provided by Johann P. Kirnberger, a pupil of Bach, who is quoted by Morgan as follows: "Performances of church music, even when sung in four, eight or more parts without instruments, were always accompanied on the organ, which served to support and keep up the pitch of the voices" (1, 159). Additionally, Spitta states that Bach's "freedom in the vocal writing is based on the assumption of harmonic substructure . . ." (3, 299).

Although the use of an organ continuo and instrumental doubling of the voices in Bach's motets is the subject of much scholarly dispute, it seems reasonable to assume that Bach employed both of these options when feasible and performed the motets without accompaniment when necessary. The use of accompaniment falls within the tradition of the Baroque performance practice. Bach's motets differ from the motet style of the Baroque period in that the voices form a harmonic structure which can stand alone and be successfully performed without accompaniment.

Each of the six motets of Bach exhibit a different structural form. This lack of a standardized form is characteristic of the Lutheran chorale motet style of the late Baroque period and is directly related to the practice of letting the text guide the structure of the motets. Bach's individuality is apparent in his choice and

juxtaposition of texts. Another area in which he differed from the style of the time was his equal treatment of choirs in the motets for double chorus.

The lessening of the motet's importance in the late Baroque period is reflected in the small number of Bach's motets and the fact that they were composed for special occasions and not as a regular part of the Lutheran liturgical service. It is unfortunate that so few are extant for his motets are fine examples of Bach's ability to adopt a traditional style and improve it with his characteristic techniques.

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