

Bach – Cantatas Vol.43 (Suzuki)

Written by bluesever

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01 – 07. *Unser Mund sei voll Lachens*, BWV 110 08 – 15. *Selig ist der Mann*, BWV 57 16 – 20. *Süßer Trost, mein Jesus kommt*, BWV 151 Hana Blažíková (soprano), Robin Blaze (counter-tenor), Gerd Türk (tenor), Peter Kooij (bass). Bach Collegium Japan Masaaki Suzuki – conductor

These three cantatas were originally performed on consecutive days of Christmas in 1725. The first work (BWV 110) was written for Christmas Day and is most notable for its large scale opening chorus. This complex movement was probably based on an early version of the French overture from the *Orchestral Suite no. 4* (BWV 10 predates the final version of the whole suite, written around 1730). The extended opening section is imbued with a regal and festive character through the inclusion of trumpet and timpani, and the text proclaiming “our mouth filled with laughter and our tongue with singing” is perfectly realised in Bach’s lively vocal and instrumental scoring. The movement is sensitively and warmly recorded on this disc, although I do feel that it is an overly controlled performance, perhaps lacking an element of excitement and enthusiasm that the composer surely called for.

The second movement (*Ye thoughts and senses*) has a very different character, scored lightly for two flutes and continuo. Suzuki consistently excels in these relatively modest chamber pieces, and this tenor aria (a perfect vehicle for Gerd Türk’s graceful and unforced singing style) is no exception. After a brief bass recitative, Robin Blaze adds polish to a rather sober aria scored for obbligato oboe d’amore. The duet which follows is far more engaging, featuring as it does the fresh voice of Czech soprano Hana Blažíková which complements Türk’s part very well indeed. Finally, the celebratory tone returns in the final aria, scored for trumpet, strings and woodwind. Peter Kooij has, to my mind, contributed as much as anyone to the ongoing success of this great cantata series – and his characterful voice is once again a convincing presence in this aria which strongly recalls (and predates) the bass aria (*Großer Herr und starker König*) from Part I of the *Christmas Oratorio*. A straightforward but satisfying chorale strophe concludes this impressive work.

BWV 57 was written for the feast of St Stephen (26 December) and concerns the promise of heavenly reward for those that have to suffer and endure temptation during their lives. It is very much a cantata of two halves: The first two arias and recitatives offer little in the way of the joyous atmosphere typically associated with festive music. The second aria (I would wish for death), is a particularly bleak movement – but it is a beautifully judged performance by Blažíková. Finally, the gloom lifts in the bass aria (Yes, yes, I can smite the enemies) which with its buoyant strings evokes the first movement of Brandenburg Concerto no. 5. Suzuki brings great momentum to this movement, perfectly capturing the optimism of the text. Following a languorous recitative scored for bass and soprano, an uplifting and dance-like soprano aria raises the drama, ending abruptly with the question “what is your gift to me?”. The answer comes in the form of a four-part chorus “...I will always and forever remain your soul’s friend...”. While not the most engaging of Bach’s cantatas, Suzuki’s respectful and unhurried performance is highly effective.

The final cantata (Sweet consolation, my Jesus is coming, BWV 151) opens with a pastoral aria, lightly scored for soprano, flute, strings and basso continuo. This is one of Bach’s greatest musical creations for solo voice, an achingly beautiful melody underpinned by a soaring and richly ornamented flute part giving way to a lively middle section in the form of a gavotte, before returning to the sublime intertwining vocal and flute parts in the final bars. This is the highlight of the entire disc, a gently burning performance, beautifully recorded. The merits of the remaining four movements (two recitatives, an alto aria and a concluding chorus) are relatively modest, but this being Bach, they are never less than enjoyable – and Suzuki maintains an attractively consistent pacing throughout.

This is another consistently rewarding set from Suzuki’s ongoing project, and although the cantatas as a whole are not among the greatest in Bach’s output, there are sublime individual movements. In particular, the recording of the first movement of BWV 151 is essential listening for all enthusiasts of historically informed performances of Bach’s great works. ---

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