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Johann Sebastian Bach
Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248

Bach was born in Eisenach, Germany, on March 21, 1685, and died in Leipzig on July 28, 1750. He is considered one of the greatest composers in the Baroque period. Bach composed the Christmas Oratorio in 1734, drawing upon music previously used in earlier secular cantatas. The composer led the first performances in Leipzig between Christmas Day and the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6), and the music was performed by the Goege at all liturgical services in Leipzig. Despite its later association with the Christmas season, the oratorio was originally performed on other days of Epiphany, including the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6) and the Feast of the Three Kings (January 7). Bach wrote the oratorio specifically for the Leipzig Thomaskirche, where he served as the director of music and organist. The oratorio consists of cantatas, choruses, arias, and recitatives, and it is divided into six parts: Sinfonia, Canticum, Nativitas, Pastoral, Benedictus, and Ut queant laxis. The oratorio is considered one of Bach's most significant works and has become a staple of the Christmas repertoire in many churches and concert halls around the world. Bach's influence on the oratorio form can be heard in the structure and layout of the work, which is divided into six parts, each consisting of several movements. The oratorio is a testament to Bach's mastery of musical form and his ability to create a cohesive and emotionally powerful musical narrative.
Johann Sebastian Bach
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In addition to vocal solos and chorus, the six cantatas that comprise the oratorio call for various combinations of two flutes, four oboes (double oboe in some sections), two horns, three trumpets, timpani, strings and continuo.

For hundreds of years, Western Christianity celebrated the birth of Jesus and the events surrounding it not with a single feast day, but with a number of special commemorations occurring on various days between December 25 (Christmas Day) and January 6 (Epiphany, the celebration of the coming of the Three Kings). Imagine participating in six celebrations of six different events on six different days: first, the birth of the infant Jesus (December 25); then the announcement of the birth to the shepherds by a host of angels (the 26th); the adoration of the baby by the shepherds (the 27th); the circumcision and naming of Jesus (New Year's Day), the coming of the Wise Men from the East (Sunday after New Year's Day); and finally the Magi's worship of the Holy Child (January 6). On each of these days, you enjoy a cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach that recounts one of these stories and has been performed upon the events and their meanings for the Christian. Now contract these six days and six cantata performances into a single presentation, on a single afternoon, of the chief events of the Christmas Story and a variety of爸 accommodating meditations, and you have Bach's Christmas Oratorio as you will hear it today. Let it introduce you to and prepare you for the rapidly approaching season of Christmastide, and lead you, as you listen, to ask yourself how does the Christmas season end?

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in 1685 in Eisenach, Germany, into a family that had produced church and town band musicians for over 500 years. Orphaned at ten, he was raised by an older brother who was an organist, and who taught young Sebastian music. The boy was unusually curious about every aspect of the art: “I had to work hard,” he said; “Anyone who works as hard will get just as far.”

Bach began his professional career at 18, when he was appointed organist at a church in Arnstadt. At 23, he became court organist and chamber musician to the Duke of Weimar. During his nine years in this post (1708-1717), he gained fame as an organ virtuoso and composer. From 1717 to 1723, Bach served the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen, producing suites, concertos, sonatas for various instruments, a great deal of keyboard music and the six Brandenburg Concertos. Maria Barbara, Bach's wife and the mother of his seven children, died in 1720, and the composer soon married Anna Magdelana, a young singer who proved to be a loyal and understanding wife, and who provided her mate with thirteen more children.

When he was 38, Bach took the position of Cantor of St. Thomas' in Leipzig, one of the most important musical posts in Germany, in charge of his school, which trained the choristers of the city's chief churches (he had to teach non-musical subjects as well); he also served as music director, composer, chorister, and organist of St. Thomas. At this post, he held for the rest of his life, Bach produced monumental musical masterworks, including the Christmas Oratorio, the St. Matthew Passion, the Mass in B Minor, The Musical Offering, and The Art of the Fugue. Although he was supported by the care of his large family and circle of friends, the tasks of a very busy professional life, and ongoing struggles with the officials of town, school, and church, who never recognized that they were dealing with perhaps the greatest musical genius ever born.

The composer described himself as living "amidst continual vexation, envy, and persecution." ... he remained unperturbed and never gave in. He died July 28,1750, leaving only a very modest material estate, but bequeathing us a wondrous wealth of musical treasures, of which this work is a particularly glittering example.

The Christmas Oratorio was completed around Christmas time in 1734 when Bach was 49. The work is not an oratorio in the usual sense of being a single work based on a biblical story from the Bible. It consists instead of a series of lyrical meditations, each of which tells the Christmas story as it appears in the books of Matthew and Luke (the writer/compiler of the text remains unknown). The oratorio was never performed under Bach’s lifetime, but has been frequently staged since the time—but in six individual parts, as described above. To this composition, Bach transferred almost completely the greater part of the choruses and arias of two secular cantatas, The Choice of Hercules and Sool, Yea Timpani, Ring Out, Trumpets, written in 1733, the year before the Christmas Oratorio was compiled. In this way, he preserved the best numbers of these ephemeral secular cantatas and assured their annual performance within the framework of the church year. Bach's ability to create a new and beautifully unified work of art out of existing "occasional" compositions is truly remarkable.

Throughout the oratorio, the texts from the New Testament are not quoted, in the sole tenor voice, "Evangelist" with continuo (cello and keyboard) accompaniment. The words of individual persons are generally presented by soloists, while those of a group are given to the chorus. The Biblical texts are intermingled with a wonderful variety of musical material: orchestral accompanied choirs, diverse arranged chorales (mostly familiar Christmas hymns), vocal ensemble numbers (the "Aria pour le superbe festin" and a fugato recitative for quartet), an "echo aria" for soprano, echo soprano, and oboe, and an amazing assortment of solo arias and recitative-like arioso settings of poetic texts that reflect or comment on the narratives. Nearly all of the sections begins with a brilliant introductory chorus in a dance-like...
Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2003 – 3:00 PM
MEANY HALL – UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Jennifer Driscoll-Holmes, soprano
Kathryn Weld, mezzo-soprano
Stephen Wall, tenor
Brian Xo, batrite

ORCHESTRA SEATTLE

SEATTLE CHAMBER SINGERS

George Shangrow, conductor

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248

Part One (Cantata for the First Day of Christmas)
Chorus: "Laudet, fröhliche"
Refrain: "Es begab sich allzu zu der Zeit"
Refrain: "Nie wird mein lieber Bruder"

Part Two (Cantata for the Second Day of Christmas)
Chorus: "Wir lieben, o schönst Vergniß"
Refrain: "Und der Engel sprach zu ihnen"
Refrain: "Was Gott dem Abenhof verheißt"

Part Three (Cantata for the Third Day of Christmas)
Chorus: "Herrn des Himmels"
Refrain: "Und da die Engel von ihnen"
Chorus: "Lasst uns uns geben"
Refrain: "Er hat sein Völk geboren"

Deutscher Text: "Dies hat er alles uns gegeben"

-- Intermission --

Part Four (Cantata for New Year’s Day)
Chorus: "Halt mit Danken"
Refrain: "Und da auch Tauen um warten"
Refrain: "Gemüse, et alles Witten"
Aria: "Habt, ich mein Land"

Part Five (Cantata for Sunday after New Year’s Day)
Chorus: "Denn der König gesungen"
Refrain: "Wo ist der neugeborene König der Juden"
Chorus: "Dein Haupt ist festgesetzt"

Part Six (Cantata for Epiphany)
Chorus: "Herr, wo die sterblichen Trauben"n
Refrain: "Da der König Herodes heßen"
Refrain: "Zwifel, wo er sich bekränzen"
Aria: "Nur ein Wink von seinen Händen"

-- Intermission --

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