

Bach Cantatas

Britten Pears Chamber Choir
The Suffolk Ensemble
Ben Parry conductor

Alexandra Meier alto
Tom Herford tenor
Francis Brett bass

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Ouverture, from Orchestral Suite No.1 in C, BWV 1066 (1724–31) 6'

Erfreut euch, ihr Herzen, BWV 66 (1724): Cantata for the Second Day of Easter 32'

- i. Chorus: Erfreut euch, ihr Herzen (Rejoice, you hearts)
- ii. Recitative (bass): Es bricht das Grab und damit unsre Not (The grave is broken and with it our suffering)
- iii. Aria (bass): Lasset dem Höchsten ein Danklied erschallen (Let a song of thanks ring forth to the highest)
- iv. Duet recitative (Fear: alto; Hope: tenor): Bei Jesu Leben freudig sein (To be joyful in Jesus' life)
- v. Aria (duet: alto, tenor): Ich fürchte nicht des Grabes Finsternissen (I do not fear the grave's darkness)
- vi. Chorale: Alleluja · text: Martin Luther, after a 12th-century hymn for Easter

Komm, Jesu, komm, BWV 229 (1731/2) · text: Paul Thymich 8'

- i. Concerto: Komm Jesu, komm (Come, Jesus, come)
- ii. Chorale: Drum schließ ich mich in deine Hände (So I put myself in your hands)

INTERVAL

Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden, BWV 6 (1725): Cantata for Easter Monday 20'

- i. Chorus: Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden (Abide with us; for it is toward evening)
- ii. Aria (alto): Hochgelobter Gottessohn (Highly praised Son of God)
- iii. Chorale: Ach bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ (Ah remain with us, Lord Jesus Christ)
- iv. Recitative (bass): Es hat die Dunkelheit an vielen Orten überhand genommen
(The darkness has taken over in many places)
- v. Aria (tenor): Jesu, laß uns auf dich sehen (Jesus, let us look upon You)
- vi. Chorale: Beweis dein Macht, Herr Jesu Christ (Reveal Your strength, Lord Jesus Christ)

Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf, BWV 226 (1729): Funeral motet · text: Romans 8:26–27 8'

- i. Concerto: Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf (The spirit gives aid to our weakness)
- ii. Chorale: Du heilige Brunst, süßer Trost (You holy warmth, sweet comfort)

In May 1723, Bach took up the position of *Kantor* of St Thomas's Church in Leipzig, the city where all the music in tonight's programme was composed, holding it until his death 27 years later. Though the position did not carry the formal title of *Kapellmeister* that Bach had recently occupied in the much smaller city of Köthen, it was one of the most prestigious posts in German musical life, and the duties were considerably more demanding and varied than those required in any of Bach's previous appointments. In addition to selecting, training and directing the numerous young choristers who attended the *Thomasschule* and the adult professional musicians who joined them for services, as well as the responsibilities as civic director of music that were also associated with the post, Bach was required to produce new music for services throughout the church year.

The composition of new and elaborate polyphonic cantatas for Sundays and church feast days was a tradition inherited from previous *Thomaskantors*, but Bach embarked upon the task with a level of industriousness and imagination never seen before or since. He is believed to have composed five complete cycles, each consisting of around 60 cantatas, during his first twelve years in post. Only small numbers of cantatas remain from the fourth and fifth cycles, leading some scholars to question whether the cycles were actually completed. What is beyond dispute, however, is that the 200 or so cantatas that have survived – most from the first two cycles, composed as soon as Bach took up his appointment in Leipzig, in the years of 1723/4 and 1724/5, and the third, composed over a rather longer period between 1725 and 1727 – constitute the most important and accomplished such body of repertoire in musical history.

Both the cantatas in tonight's programme were composed for Easter Monday services in the Thomaskirche: 'Erfreut euch, ihr Herzen' (BWV 66) for Bach's first Easter in Leipzig, 1724, and 'Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden' (BWV 6) for the same service in 1725. Given this similarity of provenance, it is surprising how different the works are from each other, in several respects. '**Erfreut euch**' reworks a lost secular *serenata* Bach had composed five years earlier – a very common practice in the 18th century, which placed less emphasis on the importance of originality than later centuries would do – converting music originally intended to celebrate the birthday of his previous employer, Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, into a proclamation of Christ's joyful resurrection. The presence of a trumpet in the instrumental group used for the cantata, alongside the expected oboes and strings, emphasises this festive character.

'**Bleib bei uns**', by contrast, seems to have been composed especially for the Easter Monday service, and focuses much more on the disciples' anxious pleas to the risen Christ to stay with them, with music reminiscent of the *Passion*

according to St John, first performed in Leipzig on Good Friday 1724. In particular, 'Ruht wohl', the moving chorus that occurs almost at the end of the *Passion*, is very close in spirit to the opening chorus of 'Bleib bei uns', with which it shares a key of C minor and a sarabande-like character.

The other two choral items in this concert are both motets for eight voices arranged for the most part in two four-part choirs. '**Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf**' was composed in 1729 to be sung at the funeral of Johann Heinrich Ernesti, professor of poetry at Leipzig University and Rector of the Thomasschule; '**Komm, Jesu, komm**' was composed in 1731 or 1732 and was also probably intended for a funeral service, judging from its subject-matter of bidding farewell to the world, but no specific occasion has been identified for its first performance. The texts of 'Der Geist hilft' are taken from Paul's Epistle to the Romans and Martin Luther's hymn, 'Komm, heiliger Geist'; 'Komm, Jesu, komm', uniquely for Bach's motets, contains no lines from the Bible, drawing its texts instead from a poem by Paul Thymich, who lived in Leipzig and taught at the Thomasschule in the late 17th century. One of Bach's predecessors as Thomaskantor, Johann Schelle, set the same text for a funeral in 1684, lending force to the hypothesis that Bach intended his setting for a similar occasion.

Both motets deploy an astonishing variety of styles and textures across their relatively brief durations, though 'Komm, Jesu, komm' is in general somewhat more austere, 'Der Geist hilft' more extroverted and celebratory, despite the occasion for which it was written. Both end with chorale-like movements for four-part-choir: the so-called 'Aria' that concludes 'Komm, Jesu, komm' is in fact a restrained but beautiful four-part setting of a minuet-like melody of Bach's own composition; 'Der Geist hilft' ends with a chorale setting of a pre-Reformation melody, the concluding 'Hallelujahs' turning optimistically heavenwards.

The exuberant **Overture** that begins tonight's concert is taken from an orchestral suite possibly performed in 1725 by the Collegium Musicum for which Bach officially took responsibility four years later. The lack of documentary evidence makes it difficult to be certain, however – unlike with the Brandenburg Concertos, no manuscripts in Bach's own hand survive for the four Orchestral Suites – and this piece may have been adapted from music Bach composed for Köthen a few years earlier. Whatever group Bach had at his disposal for this overture must have contained some talented woodwind players, since he requires the oboes and bassoon to emerge from the string group on several occasions to play virtuosically together as a trio.

Britten Pears Chamber Choir

Britten Pears Chamber Choir is the resident choir at Britten Pears Arts, performing, recording and collaborating throughout the year.

The choir follows in the tradition of Benjamin Britten's Festival Chorus from the earliest days of the Aldeburgh Festival and the Britten-Pears Chamber Choir, and prides itself on an inclusive and supportive atmosphere and culture.

Britten Pears Chamber Choir enjoys a rich and varied performance season including collaborations with leading orchestras, opera companies and guest artists. The choir is committed in its performances to a broad range of choral repertoire from early music to contemporary masterpieces, from across the centuries and throughout the world.

We welcome new singers to audition at several times throughout the year. For further information about what to expect and to arrange an audition please contact Choir Coordinator, Virginia Spray: vspray@brittenpearsarts.org

Soprano Liisa Beagley, Penny Dawe, Jo Hannon, Clare Hawes, Camilla Haycock, Juliet Liddell, Coral McEwen, Jackie Osborn, Tracey Rayner, Judy Shore, Sara Viney

Alto Tamsin Anderson, Kerstin Davey, Elizabeth Elliott, Arabella Marshall, Alexandra Mayson, Ruth McCabe, Daphne Rose, Harriet Wybor

Tenor Howard Blackett, David Freestone, Colin Hamilton, Mark Nicholson, Kit Prime, Evan Ruth, Geoffrey Smeed

Bass Mark Anderson, Stephen Bambridge, David Edwards, Will Harrison, Andrew Mackney, Mark Nicholls, Angus Pearson, Alex Warcaba-Wood, Julian Windross

The Suffolk Ensemble

The Suffolk Ensemble was formed in 2013 for a special live broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in Aldeburgh Church of Benjamin Britten's *St Nicolas* with the Britten Pears Chamber Choir to celebrate the composer's centenary.

The ensemble comprises some of the UK's leading orchestral and chamber musicians who have chosen to make their homes in Suffolk. Further memorable performances include Handel's Coronation Anthems, Bach's Magnificat, Handel's *Messiah* and James MacMillan's *Seven Last Words from the Cross*.

The Suffolk Ensemble has accompanied the live screening of *The Snowman* at Christmas at Snape Maltings since 2016.

Violin 1 Rosemary Warren-Green (leader), Rebecca Scott-Smissen

Violin 2 Kathryn Parry, James O'Toole

Viola Robert Smissen

Cello / piccolo cello Melanie Woodcock

Double bass Andrew Durban

Oboe David Price, Camilla Rhodes

Cor anglais Kim Haan

Bassoon Steve Lock

Trumpet John Jermy

Chamber organ Carolyn Gibley