

## **Peter Philips (1561-1628): Ave verum corpus; Surgens Jesus Dominus**

Peter Philips and William Byrd, two English composers separated in age by half a generation, were both schooled in the musical establishment of Elizabethan England, which that queen had revived following a period of neglect under Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth. In 1574, at fourteen, Philips was a choirboy at St. Paul's Cathedral in London—yet eight years later he left England, never to return. He had been born into a Catholic family, and the 1580's were unsafe years for Catholics, as the monarch was then preoccupied with what she supposed were Catholic plots against her life. Byrd, the older of the two, was also Catholic -- but Elizabeth, being quite fond of Byrd's music, did not begrudge him his faith, with the understanding that he was to practice it in secret. Peter Philips, however, seems not to have enjoyed any such royal favor.

Six years of study and employment as an organist followed Philips' departure from England -- in Rome, France, Spain, and finally in Belgium, where, beginning in 1583, he entered into musical service to noble families and court establishments in Antwerp and Brussels, where he remained for the final thirty-five years of his career.

Philips' years in Catholic musical centers had led him to favor the compositional style of Palestrina and Victoria (called *prima prattica*, or first practice), which by the early 1600's had largely been succeeded by the new and adventurous *seconda prattica* modernisms of Monteverdi and his contemporaries, to which Philips seems to have been only somewhat attracted, and not very strongly: *seconda prattica* is much more evident in Philips' prolific keyboard works than in his choral music.

The serene and devout *Ave verum corpus* is typical of the older *prima prattica*: almost totally contrapuntal, it stylistically belongs more to the mid-sixteenth century than to 1612, the year of its publication.

*Surgens Jesus Dominus* ventures only cautiously, though firmly, into the newer compositional style, with block-chord "alleluias" that follow the contrapuntal opening, and with interations of the words "gavisi sunt" that bring out the colors of a variety of choral ranges. But basically this piece is written in the masterful counterpoint style of the older school, through which Philips expresses the serenity of the risen Jesus' greeting to his disciples, their Alleluias, and their joy (underscored by a dramatic change of meter) at the moment they recognize their returned leader.

## **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750): Christ lag in Todesbanden (Christ lay in the bonds of death), Cantata BWV 4**

Johann Sebastian Bach was all of twenty-two when he wrote the cantata *Christ lag in Todesbanden* for Easter services in 1707 or 1708 in the town of Mühlhausen. This work may have been an audition piece for the new post he was seeking in that town; at the time of its composition he was probably still engaged as organist and composer in the town of Arnstadt.

Through this early work we can gain just a small gleam of insight into why it was that Bach is known as such a towering musical genius -- which in fact he had in many ways already become, at age twenty-two.

The Bach of *Christ lag in Todesbanden* long predates the mature Bach of Leipzig and the *St. Matthew Passion*, and this cantata is hardly like Bach's many later cantatas. It contains no recitatives; its arias are not the full-fledged *da capo* arias of his later works; it uses a 5-part string ensemble, an older form of instrumental writing that had largely been abandoned by the early 18th century in Germany; and every part of the cantata is based on a chorale tune, a practice also somewhat archaic at the time. Yet even if this cantata is built upon these older techniques, we can

hear many features of the mature Bach that are already distinctly in place: a never-ending dramatization of the text; a musical architecture and symmetry that moves the ear and the mind alike; the frequent use of musical symbolism; constant musical variation and contrast; and the composer's employment of all these musical devices for the sole purpose of giving musical voice to his faith, a motivation from which he never wavered throughout his lifetime.

Two or three years earlier, in 1705, Bach had made an arduous journey north to the city of Lübeck to work with the esteemed master Dieterich Buxtehude -- for which he had been given a month's leave, but which he overstayed for an additional three months, to the great annoyance of his Arnstadt employers (for whom in any case he didn't much care). It was from Buxtehude that Bach learned how to adapt the principle of the organ chorale prelude to a choral work: in the organ chorale prelude, a simple chorale (as a hymn was called in the Lutheran Church) was used as a structural element by having it sound in long, firm, and very prominent notes, while other voices on the organ worked rapid counterpoint around it. Here was a way to enshrine a chorale tune, and to allow its simplicity and strength to symbolize the strength of faith itself.

Buxtehude had applied the organ prelude's structural principles to choral voices, so that one voice would firmly proclaim the chorale in long notes while other voices sang counterpoint in rapid notes around it. And not only that: the surrounding contrapuntal parts would be motivically derived from the chorale, thereby strongly integrating the entire piece. It is this technique that is used for the two main choral settings of this cantata, Verses I and IV. In *Christ lag in Toedesbanden*, Bach readily imitates his master Buxtehude, but not without adding touches (described above) that only he could have conceived.

With this central technique now described, it might be good to cut to the chase and show, with the following simple diagram, how this entire cantata is a magnificent piece of musical architecture, and how Bach brings other features of his compositional style into play:

#### Instrumental Sinfonia

A foretaste of the chorale tune can be heard in the first violin (but not the whole tune; for to sound that now would be to spoil Verse I!)

#### Verse I

All the performing forces -- chorus and instruments -- sound together. The entire chorale tune is heard distinctly in the soprano voices, while other voices weave counterpoint around it. Both violins provide additional counterpoint, as descants—with melodic motives again derived from the chorale tune.

#### Verse II

A duet (which contrasts with the full ensemble). The text speaks of the power of death, represented by the unceasing dissonance of the two voices against each other, over an insistent bass line.

#### Verse III

The tenor voices alone: more contrast. This text speaks of Jesus taking away the power of death -- as symbolized by the incessant rapid *perpetuum mobile* in the two violins, sounding in unison. On the word "nichts" ("nothing"), the tenors stop abruptly, and there is an instant of silence, symbolizing that "nothing remains but death's form".

#### Verse IV

The chorus returns (but without the high strings this time), again singing music based on the chorale prelude technique, this time with the chorale tune in the alto voices. All the commotion symbolizes the struggle to which the text refers.

#### Verse V

Basses alone (note the symmetry with Verse III). Since the entire chorale tune wouldn't work well as a bass line, Bach gives them only a bit of it -- then he has the high strings sound the tune over the basses! The verse proclaims that death has been conquered—thus the basses sing the word "Tode" ("to death") on one

of their very lowest notes.

#### Verse VI

Another duet (note the symmetry with Verse II). The text happily celebrates the Resurrection -- thus the music is happy and dancelike! In fact, it's a secular *gigue*, i.e. a "jig" -- but with the ever-present chorale tune still weaving itself in and out.

#### Verse VII

All the performing forces come together again (note the symmetry with Verse I). This verse is the straightforward and unadorned chorale itself, exquisitely harmonized in a way that only Bach could.

### **Michel-Richard Delalande (1657 - 1628): De profundis (Out of the depths have I cried unto thee: Psalm 129/130), grand motet**

In Bach's *Christ lag in Todesbanden* we heard many ways in which choral voices, solo voices, strings, and the supporting continuo could combine. This facet of *seconda prattica* -- of having contrasting performing forces sound together in a variety of ways -- was known as *concertato*. It had arisen in the early 17th century with Monteverdi and his contemporaries, and by the early 18th century, at the height of the Baroque era (a name given in retrospect, by later historians), *concertato* style had worked its way well into Germany and England and had undergone much refinement.

But *concertato* had far slower growth in France. Michel-Richard Delalande's *De profundis*, written in 1724, still clings to stylistic *concertato* features that had already been considered archaic in Germany when Bach wrote *Christ lag*, seventeen years earlier -- notably the 5-voice string ensemble and the alternation of a *petit chœur* (small choir) with a *grand chœur* (large choir) -- features which may have been new back in the days of Monteverdi and Schütz, but which German composers had by now left far behind. Thus Delalande's work belongs stylistically more to the 17th century than to the 18th, much as Peter Philips' motets belong stylistically more to the 16th century than to the 17th. But, as with Philips, this in no way means that Delalande's music is not beautiful and intriguing to listen to!

It was Delalande who brought the French version of *concertato* to its greatest height, while in his position at the court of Louis XV at Versailles. This composer, born in Paris to humble parents, had the talent to be a choirboy at the church of St.-Germain-l'Auxerrois when he was but nine; in 1683, at twenty-six, he was *sous-maître* at the Royal Chapel, and two years later he was named *compositeur de la musique de la chambre*.

*De profundis* (the Psalm *Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord*) is a funeral motet, written for the interment service of the mother of Louis XV. After the concluding words of the Psalm, the music continues to the words *Requiem aeternam* and *Et lux perpetua luceat eis*, taken from the Requiem Mass liturgy.

The idea of having a unifying melodic element such as Bach's chorale tune is foreign to a French Baroque work like *De profundis*. Instead, each verse is given its own musical unity. Delalande's settings of most verses of this Psalm begin with a musical motive that later gives way to another motive, only to reappear again later -- thus providing a sort of ABA form that binds the verse together. Other simple musical forms are used as well, all much less complex than Bach's.

The moods of the various verses of the Psalm vary from one to the next, and Delalande takes advantage of this by inventing music to fit each particular mood. The music of *De profundis clamavi* is sorrowful and intense; that of *Fiant aures tuae* is hopeful and expectant; that of *Si iniquitates* is personal and heartfelt; and so on -- and Delalande, with consummate mastery, seems to sense the emotional nuance of each verse of the Psalm and to invent just the right music for it. He gives constant variation to the music by constantly moving from one kind of sound to another: he frequently contrasts *petit chœur* with *grand chœur*; he alternates choral sections with solo arias, duets between voice and wind instrument, a trio, a quartet, and two brief

instrumental sinfonias; and he moves from a somber to a happy mood in the concluding Requiem Mass verses. Indeed, the entire work is a sort of ever-changing and ever-engaging musical kaleidoscope.