

Musical Treasure Chest #37

I am determined that this Musical Treasure Chest will be an upbeat and festive one to begin 2021. With the wealth of music that I cherish and enjoy, I decided that I would share with you a work celebrating the season and focus entirely on that. Music brings such a depth of emotional feeling, and I find that I turn to music as a meaningful escape and sometime just for the sheer exhilaration of the listening experience. Over the last week my husband and I have been going through the cantatas that comprise the **Christmas Oratorio of Johann Sebastian Bach**. Somehow a bit underperformed and less well-known than Handel's *Messiah*, none-the-less the Christmas Oratorio deserves a place in your listening library and on the concert stage. In fact, I think with familiarity you may find that you want it to be a regular part of your musical holiday season.

Written for the 1734-5 Christmas season the Oratorio is made up of six parts meant to be performed in Bach's church (St. Thomas/St Nicolai in Leipzig specifically). Designed to be spread out over the 12 days from Christmas to Epiphany (January 6th) Bach's conception described particular events in the Christmas story, including Christ's birth, the adoration of the shepherds and the adoration of the Magi. After its initial performance in that 1734-5 year the oratorio was not performed again until 1857. I have pondered why the piece has not gained a mainstay in the Christmas musical repertory. *Messiah* was immediately popular from its premiere in 1742 and has never diminished in its frequency of programming. But Handel's work was premiered in a public, non-sacred venue. Bach's oratorio was intended entirely for church performance, split up over six church services and therefore did not enter the public consciousness in the manner that *Messiah* did. But what a masterpiece this oratorio is: festive, joyful, descriptive and inspired. I will focus on the last two parts of it, which are appropriate for the Sunday after New Year's Day and for Epiphany.

The six parts are orchestrated with parts 1, 3 and 6 having the largest forces (trumpets and timpani, plus various woodwinds and strings/continuo). The other

parts are more slimly written with only winds and strings or, in part 4, horns, oboes and strings. The vocal forces include solos, ensembles and choruses, as well as chorales and recitatives. Part 5 celebrates the Journey of the Magi and Part 6 the Adoration of the Magi. Each part is unique in its flow of musical material and follows no set format. But what Bach does beautifully is tell the story. Most of the action of the narrative is sung in the recitatives, while the arias telegraph the emotion of that scene. Bach pairs the singers often with solo instruments (oboe, oboe d'amore, solo violin) for gorgeous colors and creative dialogue between voice and instrument.

Here is a just superb live performance with John Eliot Gardiner, Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists in Weimar, Germany. The singing and playing are impeccable, and particularly impressive is the tenor, who has memorized his recitatives (and he sings pretty well too!). My husband and I have really enjoyed listening to the oratorio over the past week, and we hope you do too. Happy New Year!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1NafQeEWNks>