

Program Notes by Don Adkins

Cantata No. 202 “Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten” (Wedding Cantata) (1718)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750)

The Baroque cantata originated in Italy as a secular solo vocal work accompanied by a small group of instruments. This mini-opera with one character was comprised of recitatives (sung dialogue) and arias and was intended to be performed without costume or staging in small, more intimate settings. The German Lutherans took this concept and transformed the cantata into a sacred work intended for church performance with any number of vocalists and instruments, depending on the situation. The popular Italian opera style was tempting to some of these Lutheran composers and many of them, Bach included, were admonished and even contractually barred from bringing operatic style into the conservative church. The church cantata was extremely popular during Bach’s time and he composed hundreds of them. He occasionally returned to the original, secular Italian cantata model in works such as the “Coffee,” “Peasant,” and “Wedding” cantatas.

Tragically, a large number of his cantatas, both sacred and secular, have been lost because publication was not an important part of Bach’s professional life. The cantatas were written for specific performances and not thought of as a historical legacy. The hand manuscripts, which were usually the property of whoever paid for the event, would be used once or twice under Bach’s supervision and then often placed in some type of temporary storage where they were subject to fire, flood, nesting rats, recycling as wrapping paper or thrown out by enthusiastic cleaning ladies. The manuscripts that survived were sometimes reused by Bach with changes to match the new performance conditions. The original manuscript for the *Wedding Cantata* has disappeared but fortunately was roughly copied by a 13-year-old student Johannes Ringk who dated his copy 1730. This date then leads to speculation as to when the cantata was actually written. A strong possibility is the time period when Bach was working in Cöthen (1717 – 1723) although a later date during his years in Leipzig (1723 – 1750) is also possible.

Bach’s time in Cöthen was spent writing secular music. Cöthen’s churches were all Calvinist which meant that no instrumental music was allowed as a part of the sacred experience including Bach’s favorite instrument, the organ. Prince Leopold of Cöthen was an enthusiastic supporter of the arts, especially music. His travels made him familiar with the latest musical fashions throughout Europe and he was a talented performer on the harpsichord, violin and viola da gamba. He hired an orchestra of 18 of the best players available with the intention of raising the level of German secular music to that of the Italians. He treated his players extremely well and mixed with them more like a fellow musician than

their Prince. Bach developed a close friendship with him that continued even after Bach left Cöthen for Leipzig. Bach wrote to his old school-friend Georg Erdmann: "There I had a gracious prince as master, who knew music as well as he loved it, and I hoped to remain in his service until the end of my life." It was during this happy time that Bach may have composed the *Wedding Cantata* to be performed at a wedding party.

The Prince would take Bach and some of his instrumentalists with him when he traveled. One of these trips was a stay in Carlsbad, a meeting place for the European aristocracy, during the summer of 1720. Bach returned to find that his wife had suddenly taken ill and died. Bach, now a single father of four children, continued his work in Cöthen. Bach wrote and performed in cantatas for the Prince's birthday and New Year's celebrations. Singers were brought in from other courts to perform including Anna Magdalena Wilcke who eventually became Bach's second wife. The Prince married a week after Bach's wedding but, unfortunately, his new wife was neither interested in music nor supportive of her husband's musical activities. Bach labelled her "amusa," without a muse, and wrote to a friend that the Princess was "making the musical inclination of said Prince somewhat luke-warm." It was this declining musical environment and the desire to find a place with better educational opportunities for his sons that led Bach to leave Cöthen and take his last position in Leipzig at St. Thomas Church.

The format of the *Wedding Cantata* is typical in that it alternates between arias and recitatives. The arias utilize different combinations of instruments from the full group of solo oboe, strings and continuo (keyboard and cello); to continuo alone; solo violin and continuo; and solo oboe and continuo. The recitatives are all secco recitatives which means that they are accompanied by continuo only. Three of the arias, numbers 1, 3 and 7 are da capo arias: the performers repeat the beginning of the aria with the soloist providing appropriate embellishment in an improvisatory fashion. Bach, however, did not trust soloists to do a musical job of the da capo so he would usually make his solo lines complex enough that there was little room for improvisation. The text ties the coming of spring with the flowering of love and several mythological figures, including Cupid and his bow, are invoked. An unusual feature of this cantata is found in the last movement which begins as an instrumental dance, a gavotte, which the singer joins to bid that the couple's contentment will last "a thousand radiant days of prosperity." The dance was certainly intended to leave the wedding guests with a toe-tapping experience at the end.