

C. P. E. Bach: The Complete Works is again hosting an “open sing” as a fringe event at the Boston Early Music Festival. This year the free reading session/choral workshop will focus on C. P. E. Bach’s Magnificat (Wq 215) and will feature soloists singing along with the choir, led by Edward Jones, the Gund University Organist and Choirmaster at The Memorial Church of Harvard University. The event is scheduled for Monday, June 10, 2019, from 2:00–4:30 pm. We asked Mr. Jones to share his reflections and observations made as he prepared for the workshop.

Reflections on C. P. E. Bach’s Magnificat

On Palm Sunday in 1786, C. P. E. Bach conducted a concert organized by the musical branch of the Handlungsakademie in Hamburg. This oft-referenced program featured selections from J. S. Bach’s B-Minor Mass and Handel’s *Messiah*; plus C. P. E. Bach’s Magnificat and his double-choir Heilig. The programming is telling: C. P. E. Bach aligned himself as the heir to and culmination of both the German polyphonic school and the European oratorio tradition, in a performance that would be his musical farewell to the Hamburg public. He would die less than two years later.

That C. P. E. Bach would choose the Magnificat, his first major choral work, for such a public display is telling. It is clearly a work he held in high esteem—he had programmed it in Hamburg before, and had mined its various movements to populate other works, most famously the *Passions-Cantate* (Wq 233). Stylistically diverse, the Magnificat shows Bach’s mastery of both old and new styles, which supports the hypothesis that this work was an audition piece for Leipzig. Bach was trying to prove his mettle outside of small-scale keyboard compositions, and the outsized framing choruses of the Magnificat are clearly meant to impress.

A comparison between C. P. E. Bach’s and his father’s Magnificat is instructive for the similarities but also the many differences. Most basically, the verses of the St. Luke text are divided differently between the two: C. P. E. chose to incorporate “Et exultavit” into the opening chorus (though it is treated slightly more polyphonically than the chordal vocal opening), whereas J. S. set it as a solo (perhaps indicating a theological difference in approach). “Quia respexit” is set similarly in both works: B-minor (not an unusual choice after a D-major opening), plaintive, and rather introverted. A highly ornamented vocal line and accompaniment dominate both settings, but C. P. E. throws in a slightly peculiar figure at the end of each plangent phrase: a dotted figure, *forte*, in the midst of a much quieter, plaintive sound-world. The affect changes at “Ecce” in C. P. E.’s setting, incorporating beautiful, sighing melismas; in the J. S. setting the vocal line becomes slightly more angular, but the affect remains the same. Indeed, in contrast to his father it seems that C. P. E. Bach is happy to change affect within the same movement—sometimes within the same measure. The muscular setting of C. P. E.’s “Quia fecit” once again contrasts angular vocal lines with rich melismas on the word “sanctum”; as is usual with his bass arias, J. S. Bach’s continuo-only setting is rather more pompous.

The chorus “Et Misericordia”—which was reset in the Hamburg version, presumably because the original had become too familiar in its re-used *Passions-Cantate* iteration—to my ear seems somewhat anachronistic stylistically in the Magnificat—coming from the sound palette of C.P.E.’s later choral works (particularly *Die Israeliten in der Wüste*, Wq 238). Specifically, a wandering, chromatic bass line (like the very beginning of *Die Israeliten*, depicting the Israelites in diaspora) gives harmonic instability; indeed, the overall harmonic meandering seems of a much later era. The juxtaposition of opposing dynamics (plus the excess of dynamic markings), the proximity of diatonic and chromatic measures within a 4-bar phrase, and the long orchestral play-out—all of these factors, to my ear, pre-figure the early Romantics.

The threefold trumpet repetition (added for Hamburg) at the start of “Fecit potentiam” recalls the jubilant opening of J.S. Bach’s Magnificat. C.P.E. sets this movement as a *galant* bass aria; J.S. as a bravura chorus. Both settings of “Deposuit” are very similar in terms of musical gesture: descending lines abound (clearly prompted by the text), with a scattering figure in the violins and an opening with tenor in high register. The exquisite “Suscepit Israel” recalls J.S. Bach’s use of flutes in “Esurientes,” and that delicate palette of muted strings and flutes (the opening colors of *Die Israeliten*) seems to me one of C.P.E.’s most beautiful orchestrations. Both Magnificat settings (not unusually) recall opening material at the end: C.P.E. does so right at the start of the “Gloria;” J.S. holds off until “Sicut erat.” C.P.E. Bach’s “Gloria” leads into a very learned (and lengthy) fugue; one of the hardest things for a choir to sustain is this outsized fugue, which occurs right at the end of the work, requiring some judicious vocal and dynamic pacing.

Choirs and orchestras have often performed a lot of J.S. Bach and Handel, as well as much Haydn and Mozart, but very little of that in-between period that is so fascinating stylistically and rhetorically. One of the wonderful things about preparing these works with inquisitive musicians is to observe the telling glances, smiles, and furrowed eyebrows that give away those peculiar moments so particular to C.P.E. Bach. Those moments of almost schizophrenic juxtaposition—of unrelated harmonies, emotions, styles, and dynamics—are the very essence of the *Empfindsamer Stil*, as exemplified by several exquisite solo movements in the Magnificat. Hints of a Mozartian elegance and a Haydnesque manipulation of phrase structure abound, while a Beethovenian muscularity pervades the closing fugue (these were all composers who revered C.P.E. Bach). Indeed, through his interest in the secular discourse of the day—manifested in his friendships with poets, painters, and philosophers—C.P.E. Bach’s musical ideals would become a central part of the next century’s German Romantic aesthetic. We see evidence of this in the Magnificat, but more clearly in the later Hamburg works, such as *Die Israeliten* and *Die Auferstehung und Himmelfahrt Jesu* (Wq 240).

Beguiling, intriguing, and fascinating, C.P.E. Bach’s choral works are worthy of far more attention from conductors and concert organizers. By programming these magnificent works we can expose the ears of participants and audiences alike to a sound-world that is at once familiar and yet strangely distant.

Edward Elwyn Jones