



The RIAS Bach Cantatas Project

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The 28 cantatas here – plus one by Telemann, thought to be Bach's at the time of the recording – are a selection from a huge project which was intended to record the complete Bach series but achieved only 78 works. The project was devised by the post-war Berlin radio station Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor (RIAS) and, through reaching a large radio audience was a very significant milestone in the rebirth of musical awareness in post-war Germany. The extent to which defeated, occupied and soon-to-be-divided Germany was physically smashed and demoralised in 1945 is outlined in some detail by Habakuk Traber in the booklet, while Rüdiger Albrecht gives more specific details about the series itself, its beginnings in 1946 and premature end in 1953 with the departure of Karl Ristenpart to take up the direction of the Saarland Radio Orchestra.

To all this can be added some relevant technical detail. All the recordings here were made in the twentieth-century Jesus-Christus-Kirche, Berlin-Dahlem, on magnetic tape. Tape recording was of good and consistent quality in Germany even by 1945; so much so that the BBC was still using captured German tape machines as late as 1952. In West Germany there was a much earlier move to FM radio than elsewhere in Europe, largely because of the poor allocation of AM channels to the whole country by the Copenhagen agreement of 1950. Many of the early recordings were re-made as the quality of the tapes improved, because the faults in the older ones became more obvious on FM radio. A noticeable improvement in quality can be heard in this selection which, by 1950 – the Bach bicentenary year – became at least comparable with commercial recordings of the period. During that year 21 of these 28 Bach recordings were made.

The first impression – and it is one that will surprise those who have been persuaded by exaggerated claims for "period" performances is of the relative modernity of the instrumental playing and (to a lesser extent) of the choral singing. The scale of these performances is very much as it would now be but, of course, there are no period instruments. Except for odd moments from the solo singers there is an absence of unwelcome overt "expressiveness". From the instrumentalists there is remarkable, adroit and attractive playing. The many obbligato soloists in the arias give great pleasure. There is the very occasional disaster, as with the solo trumpet which descants the final chorus of No. 31 and is painfully out of tune.

Mention of trumpet playing – elsewhere never less than adequate – brings me to the choral singing. In both there is a tendency to "punch out" fast semiquavers note by note with the chorus aspiring every one of them, although there are not many such passages. Another anachronism is the use of a harpsichord in the basso continuo. By the end of the 1950s this had been banished in sacred music by a chamber or positive organ.

Among the soloists there are some outstanding singers who went on to international careers. The focused and very spiritual voice of Agnes Giebel (Nos. 47, 32, 108, 52, 79, 202) is perhaps the finest among the sopranos but Gunthild Weber – less consistent – is also often memorable (Nos. 58, 76, 199, 164, 140). Ingrid Lorenzsen, who takes many of the alto solos sometimes sings with the kind of vibrato that now sounds anachronistic in Bach. All the tenor roles are taken by Helmut Krebs, whose effortless, articulate voice seems ideal for this music. Some of his numbers are extremely challenging, none more so than the aria "Hasse nur, hasse mich recht" in No. 76 where even he resorts to aspirating the swirling melismatic passages. Finally – and for some his presence will be decisive – there is much characterful and meaningful singing from the young Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, whose first commercial recordings coincided with this collection. From April 1950 comes Cantata No. 37 from which the recitative and aria "Ihr Sterblichen ... Der Glaube schafft der Seele Flügel" stands as an arresting exemplar of the quality of Fischer-Dieskau's early style.

One cannot hear these performances without sometimes reflecting on the straitened and austere environment out of which they sprang in ruined post-war Germany. Never more is this so than in No. 21, *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*, recorded in the early summer of 1950. From the opening Sinfonia (Adagio assai) to the final chorus with its resplendent trumpets and drums we follow the despairing soul down into the abyss. Through the central Christian notion of its union with God the journey then leads through the motet-like chorus "Sei nun wieder zufrieden" to final joy.

Among the other works it is often the betterknown that leave the most lasting impression. No. 140, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* has the RIAS boys' chorus singing its cantus firmus followed by Helmut Krebs's exultant recitative beginning "Er kommt". No. 79 is also notable for its (splendidly recorded) opening chorus in a style close to Händel and the direct simplicity of Lorri Lail's alto aria with flute obbligato that follows it.

Throughout the series we are aware that we are listening to history as well as to music. The ultimate hero of the project is surely Karl Ristenpart himself, whose later work with the Saarland Chamber Orchestra brought excitement and quality to the label Club Français du Disque and also deserves to be heard again.