Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding, BWV 176, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

1. [chorus] Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt ding
2. [alto recitativo] Ich meine, recht verzagt
3. [soprano aria] Dein sonst hell beliebter Schein
4. [bass recitativo] So wundre dich, O Meister, nicht
5. [alto aria] Ermuntert euch, furchtsam und schüchterne Sinne
6. [chorale] Auf daß wir also allzugleich

Notes on the Program

When the poet Christiane Mariane von Ziegler wrote this cantata text, which was set by Bach for 27 May 1725, she was particularly intrigued by the thought that Nicodemus, a ‘ruler of the Jews’ (John 3.1), risked meeting Jesus only by night. Here she finds a general human characteristic: ‘The heart is a perverse and desperate thing; who can fathom it?’, says the prophet Jeremiah (17.9), and the poet prefaces her text with these words – slightly modified – as a motto. Unlike in the days of Joshua, when the sun stood still at Gibeon till the hoards of the Amorites had been vanquished (Joshua 10.12 f.), Nicodemus longs for night to come (no. 2). The following aria first takes up the same ideas and then proceeds with the words of Nicodemus: no one could do the signs that Jesus does unless God were with him. The second recitative-aria pair gives an indication of the comfort that the fearful Christian derives from faith in Jesus. Bach himself lends still greater weight to this reflection by adding to the recitative words of the poet a paraphrase of John 3.16: ‘For all who but believe in You shall not be lost’. With praise and thanks for this promise, the aria leads to the concluding chorale, the eighth verse of the hymn Was alle Weisheit in der Welt by Paul Gerhardt (1653).

Bach’s opening chorus to words from Jeremiah is concise and pithy. A single great choral fugue – with the strings independent but unthematic and the oboes doubling the voice parts – takes up the entire movement. There is no instrumental prelude or postlude at all, and the inner dynamic of the movement is achieved not, as often in Bach, by concerto-like solo-tutti or group contrasts, but by the text-engendered dynamic of the fugue subject itself and by the string accompaniment that underpins its character. The fugue subject, which enters in the bass characterizes the textual distinction between the ‘perverse’ and ‘desper- ate’ sides of the human heart by means of rising triadic and scale motion on the one hand and sinking chromaticism on the other. Once the fugue has achieved full texture with the entry of all four voice parts, it maintains it without change to the end, forming a unique musical monolith – like an erratic block
left by a retreating glacier – whose overall character gives expression to defiance rather than despair.

The aria ‘Dein sonst hell beliebter Schein' (no. 3), which is prefaced by a brief, contemplative recitative, forms a palpable contrast to this powerful introduction. Here again, the composer was essentially guided by a single image from a libretto rich in ideas, namely the bright light with which Jesus the Master, upon whom God’s Spirit rests, confronts the timorous hearts of men. Consequently, the aria takes the form of a spirited gavotte whose relaxed triplet figuration does not cease even when the soprano holds a long note on the word ‘ruhn’ ('rest'). The second recitative, no. 4, though brief, is extended by an andante arioso for the paraphrase of John 3.16 appended by Bach, which is longer than the preceding recitative altogether. This arioso is made up of two similar passages of highly expressive melody, which derive their impulse from an ostinato figure.

Like the first aria, the second, no. 5, is somewhat dance-like, a quality that now emerges more self-evidently from the comforting words of the text. As in the opening fugue, the theme is a direct product of the text, as is clear from its upward surge on ‘ermuntert euch’ (‘rouse yourselves’) and its narrow, semitone steps on ‘furchtsam und schüchterne’ (‘fearful and diffident’). The passages that follow also prove to be text-engendered: note the calling leaps of a seventh on ‘höret’ (‘hear’) and the coloraturas on ‘Loben’ and ‘preisen’ (‘praise’ and ‘glorify’). In the instrumental obbligato part, Bach unites all three instruments of the oboe family – two oboes and oboe da caccia (performed on english horn in today’s performance) – in unison, forming dynamic contrasts by requiring that two of them rest during the vocal passages.

The melody of the plain four-part concluding chorale originally belonged to Luther’s hymn Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam. Bach’s harmonization reveals how the tension between church-tone melody and ‘modern’ major-minor tonality was endured and overcome.


Text and Translation

1. Chorus
‘Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding um aller Menschen Herze.’

2. Alto Recitativo
Ich meine, recht verzagt,
Daß Nikodemus sich bei Tage nicht,
Bei Nacht zu Jesu wagt.
Die Sonne mußte dort bei Josua so lange stille stehn,
So lange bis der Sieg vollkommen war geschehn;
Hier aber wünschet Nikodem: O säh ich sie Rüste gehn!

‘There is something perverse and desperate about all human hearts.’

I think that, truly desperate, Nicodemus ventured to meet Jesus Not by day but by night. There the sun had to stand still so long for Joshua, So long until the victory was fully accomplished; But here Nicodemus wishes; ‘Oh, if only I saw it setting!’
3. **Soprano Aria**

_Dein sonst hell beliebter Schein_  
_Soll vor mich umnebelt sein,_  
_Weil ich nach dem Meister frage,_  
_Denn ich scheue mich bei Tage._  
_Niemand kann die Wunder tun,_  
_Denn sein Allmacht und sein Wesen,_  
_Scheint, ist göttlich außerlesen,_  
_Gottes Geist muß auf ihm ruhn._

Your otherwise bright beloved light  
Shall be befogged for me, Since I ask for the Master,  
For I am afraid by day.  
No one can do such miracles,  
For His almighty power and His essence,  
It seems, are divinely chosen: God's Spirit must rest on Him.

4. **Bass Recitativo**

_So wondere dich, o Meister, nicht,_  
_Warum ich dich bei Nacht ausfrage!_  
_Ich fürchte, daß bei Tage_  
_Mein Ohnmacht nicht bestehen kann._  
_Doch tröst ich mich, du nimmst mein Herz und Geist_  
_Zum Leben auf und an,_  
_Weil alle, die nur an dich glauben, nicht verloren werden._

So marvel not, O Master, Why I question You by night!  
I fear that by day  
My powerlessness cannot endure.  
Yet I comfort myself: You take up and accept my heart and spirit  
Into Life,  
For all who but believe in You shall not be lost.

5. **Alto Aria**

_Ermuntert euch, furchtsam und schüchterne Sinne,_  
_Erholet euch, höret, was Jesus verspricht:_  
_Daß ich durch den Glauben den Himmel gewinne._  
_Wenn die Verheißung erfüllend geschicht,_  
_Werd ich dort oben_  
_Mit Danken und Loben Vater, Sohn und Heilgen Geist_  
_Preisen, der dreieinig heißt._

Rouse yourselves, fearful and diffident spirits,  
Recover, hear what Jesus promises:  
That I gain heaven through faith.  
When the promise is fulfilled,  
I shall there above With thanks and praise  
Glorify Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
Which are called triune.

6. **Chorale**

_Auf daß wir also allzugleich Zur Himmelsporten dringen_  
_Und dermaleinst in deinem Reich_  
_Ohn alles Ende singen,_  
_Daß du alone König seist,_  
_Hoch über alle Götter,_  
_Gott Vater, Sohn und Heilger Geist,_  
_Der Frommen Schutz und Retter,_  
_Ein Wesen, drei Personen._

Thus all at once  
We break through to heaven's gates  
And someday in Your Kingdom  
Sing without end  
That You alone are King,  
High above all gods:  
God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
Protector and deliverer of the devout,  
One Essence, three Persons.
Personnel

John Wiles, conductor
Alyssa Piper, soprano
Calista Rowe, mezzo soprano
Marcos Antunez, bass

Orchestra

Oboe
Lin Nikkel
Kristina Graham*
Lauren Geerlings (English Horn)

Violin I
Emma Becker

Violin II
Maggie Ierien

Viola
Caleb Burdine

Violoncello
Turner Sperry

Bass
McCaffrey Brandt

Harpsichord
Mariko Morita+

*guest artist
+faculty artist

Chorus

Soprano
Katelyn Bakker
Julia Fink
Lillian Kallenberger
Alyssa Piper

Alto
Emily Carlo
Emily Clouser
Abigail Edlemon
Jaime Knox
Ayanna Reckman
Calista Rowe

Tenor
Juan Morales
Brennan Regan
Logan Stapp
Brady Van Waardhuizen

Bass
Marcos Antunez
Noah Frederiksen
Brock Trenkamp
Jon Turner