Conductor's Notes: Christmas Oratorio

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Bach's Christmas Oratorio is a series of six cantatas for the first, second and third days of Christmas, New Year's Day, Epiphany, and the first Sunday after New Year. The first (and, so far as we know, only) performances of the complete oratorio during Bach's lifetime were during the 1734–35 Christmas season. The Bach Study Group worked on the Christmas Oratorio from September 2009 through April 2010. The following notes, written for the musicians of that group, focus on the readings I found most interesting.

Scripture

Bach and his librettist (likely Picander) build the narrative of the Christmas Oratorio around the two gospels—Luke and Matthew— that offer detailed stories of Jesus' birth.

> Cantata 1 (Luke 2:1-7): Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem; the child is born in the manger.
> Cantata 2 (Luke 2:8-14): The angels announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds.
> Cantata 3 (Luke 2:15-20): The shepherds go to Bethlehem and tell what they have witnessed; Mary ponders in her heart.
> Cantata 4 (Luke 2:21): The child is circumcised and given the name Jesus.
> Cantata 5 (Matthew 2:1-6): The Magi ask King Herod for the whereabouts of the new king of the Jews.
> Cantata 6 (Matthew 2:7–12): The Magi are directed to Bethlehem; they arrive at the manger and then return to their country.

Another verse from Luke, the end of the Magnificat (Luke 1:51 "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts"), runs through the sixth cantata.

Old Testament. References to the Old Testament appear in both accompanied recitatives and arias. Isaiah is in the first, third, and fifth cantatas, Abraham in the second. The metaphor of Christ as bridegroom of the Church, from the Song of Solomon, appears in both the second and the sixth cantatas. The oratorio opens with a paraphrase of the first two verses of Psalm 100.

Gospel of John. While the fourth gospel has no nativity story, John does offer a perspective on Jesus' origins. The Prologue to John opens with the eternal divine Christ (John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God") and continues with the specific human Christ (John 1:9 "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us"). Theologians of Bach's day treated all four gospels as synoptic, each contributing details to a single common gospel. Even Passions, although told "according to" a specific gospel, often included details from other gospels to fill out the story. I think that Bach, in setting his Christmas Oratorio, integrated John's perspective at crucial places to invoke a fuller meaning of the nativity.

Twice Bach makes direct musical references to his Saint John Passion. In the fifth cantata he sets the Magi's question (45), "Where is the new-born King of the Jews?" to the chorus in the Passion where the priests sing, "We have no king but Caesar" (SJP, 23f). Bach may have meant the reference simply as regal music or he may have wanted to link the chorus to the Christian tradition that associates the Magi with Gentiles, who are the recipients of salvation. In the sixth cantata, Bach models the recitative (63), "What can hell's terror do now that we rest in the hands of Jesus?" on the solo "The Judean hero triumphs" (SJP, 30, m 20). A more tenuous musical reference is in the third cantata, where the shepherds (26) sing "Let us go to Bethlehem" with ascending and descending runs

that echo the bass soloist singing "Hurry to Golgotha" (SJP, 24). I did not hear this latter reference as valid until we had studied the fifth and sixth cantatas with their very clear linking of Christ's birth to his human death, but it makes sense to me that Bach would intend the connection in the third cantata, which centers on the message of salvation.

The Christmas Oratorio contains a number of textual references to John. In the fifth cantata, the bass (38) calls Jesus "o süsses Wort!" (John 1:1) and alto of the Terzetto (51) responds to the soprano and tenor questions, "When will the time appear" and "When will he come?" with "Hush! He is already here" (John 1:2 He was with God in the beginning).

The fifth cantata, the cantata for Epiphany, contains a number of references to Jesus as light, a recurring theme in the Gospel of John. The alto soloist (second part of 45) speaks first to the Magi calling the star "the light… [that] has appeared for your salvation," and then to Jesus directly as "the light which shall shine on the Gentiles." (John 1:9 "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world"). The tenor soloist of the following movement (47) prays that the rays of the star of the Magi might "illuminate also my dark thoughts and my heart" (John 1:5 "The light shines in darkness and the darkness has not overcome it"). Both chorales (46 and 53) also point to Jesus as the light overcoming the darkness of the human heart.

The theme of the sixth cantata, Christ the Victor, is the classic Greek view of atonement that Bach celebrated in his Saint John Passion. In this metaphor of redemption, humanity is caught between the powers of light and darkness. God through Christ defeats the enemies of humanity. The sins of mankind, so prominent in the later Latin view of atonement and which are prominent in Bach's Saint Matthew Passion, have little place in the Christmas Oratorio.

Time and History

Salvation history views Scripture as the unified story of God's plan for the salvation of humanity as revealed through successive eras of the Bible. The events of the Old Testament exist both within and outside their historical time frame and have meaning that only later generations can understand. Isaiah's prophecy of a messianic king is finally fulfilled at Christ's birth. God's promise to Abraham that he will lead a new nation is also God's promise to humans that his Son will inaugurate a new era. The bridegroom and bride of the Song of Solomon represent Christ and the Church.

Bach divides the era of New Testament by distinguishing the telling of the event (the evangelist's Scripture) from the event itself (the voices of personas present at the nativity). Bach juxtaposes the different eras so that the listener is continually reminded that the Old Testament prefigured what was revealed in the New and that both create a catalyst for faith.

Cyclical time. Salvation history fits into a concept of time that is more cyclical than linear. However irreversible the events of history might be, time itself is a circle, not a line. Just as the sun rises and sets day after day, so the events of history are revisited, Old Testament to New, one era to another. Karol Berger (*Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow*) sees a major shift occurring during the last years of Bach's life, a shift that placed time on its linear scale of the modern world. Bach's music, he believes, is the final musical expression of cyclical time. Bach reflects the circularity of time through a number of musical devices.

- The *da capo* chorus or aria with ritornellos
- A closing chorale of a cantata scored the same as the opening chorus
- A movement from one cantata paralleling, through text or music or both, a movement from an earlier cantata

These devices invite listeners to connect a later stage of the narrative with an earlier one, always with new understanding—like a *da capo* aria in which the A section is never quite the same once the B section has been sung.

God's Time. Bach's music also implies a relationship between historical events and God's timeless eternity. The opening choruses seem to relate more to God's time than to the story at hand. Once into the story, Bach constantly interrupts the flow of human time with reflections on how specific events relate to eternal truths. As he does this, he attenuates the temporal distance between his 18th century listeners and the events of Scripture, with all human time suspended within a timeless eternity.

Stages of worship. In combining Scriptural narrative with reflections and meditations, Bach was following the practice, originating in the late 17th century, that Lutherans read the Bible, interpret it according to Lutheran theology, reflect and meditate on its meaning, and affirm their faith through prayer. He differentiated each stage musically without always maintaining the prescribed order.

     Stage 1. *Dictum* (gospel text): evangelist, *secco* recitative
     Stage 2. *Explicatio* (interpretation of the gospel): non-Biblical text set to accompanied recitative
     Stage 3*. Applicatio* (reflection/meditation on the meaning of the gospel): rhymed poetry set to aria
     Stage 4. Affirmation (congregational prayer, plea or thanksgiving): chorale

The voices singing the interpretations and reflections may be Old Testament characters, personas from the nativity, or members of the Lutheran Church. The chorales are the responses of the congregation, affirming their faith within the structure of the Church.

I find it useful to think of early 18th century Lutherans as the Faithful, believers who are fully engaged with the story. More than merely reflecting on the meaning of Christ's birth, they interact with the personas of the nativity, calling to them, as it were, across the centuries or, in some cases, standing with them in Christ's presence as witnesses.

Compositional Process

Robert Marshall (*The Compositional Process of J.S. Bach)* has examined the extant original scores—both composing and "fair copy" scores—and concludes that Bach began composing the opening movement of a cantata and proceeded linearly to the end. Eric Chafe (*Tonal Allegory in the Cantatas of J.S. Bach)*, who has provided the most in-depth musical analyses of Bach's cantatas, believes that Bach carefully planned each cantata, especially its tonal structure, well in advance of writing it down. Both theories give us a better understand of how Bach composed.

Tonal structure and allegory. The Christmas Oratorio begins and ends in the key of D, a key of trumpet fanfares. Part I moves from D to the subdominant G and back to D. Part II begins in the seemingly unrelated key of F, moves to A, the dominant of D, and finally returns to D. The choice of keys is one of Bach's tools for organizing the oratorio around Lutheran theology. Steeped in the tonal theories of the 17th and early 18th centuries, he gives key signatures allegorical significance. In general, these theories associate sharper regions of tonality with divinity, flatter areas with humanity. In the Christmas Oratorio, both cantatas and individual movements are set in keys that reflect movement between the divine and human aspects of Christ as well as the divine aspirations and humble circumstances of humans.

The first cantata presents Christ as both human and divine. The second cantata, set in the subdominant of G, emphasizes the Christ's human birth. The third cantata returns to the key of D for the message of salvation. These three cantatas, performed on the first three

days of Christmas, emphasize the historical narrative: the advent and birth, the shepherds in the field, the message of Christ's birth as promise of salvation for mankind. Taken together, they represent the Old Year and the literal events of the birth.

Part II of the oratorio, performed on New Year's Day, Epiphany, and the Sunday after New Year's, represents the New Year and what Christ's birth means in terms of Christianity. The fourth cantata, in the flattest region of the oratorio, is the personal response to the incarnation and the human understanding of faith and salvation. The fifth cantata, in the dominant of D, identifies Jesus as the divine light. The final return to D celebrates the Christ who overcomes darkness and the devil, whose eventual death is the ultimate victory.

Part I. Old Year: literal-historical narrative			Part II. New Year: Spiritual sense of human understanding		
Cantata 1	**Cantata 2**	**Cantata 3**	**Cantata 4**	**Cantata 5**	**Cantata 6**
Key of D (##)	Key of G (#)	Key of D (##)	Key of F (♭)	Key of A (###)	Key of D (##)
Christ human and divine	Humanity of Christ	Message of salvation	Human understanding	Divine light	Christ the Victor

Parody. Bach used the parody technique to rework earlier pieces into the Christmas Oratorio, matching, in general, the affects of the original and the parody.
- BWV 213 *Hercules at the Crossroads*, a birthday cantata composed for Elector Friedrich Christian in September 1733
- BWV 214 *Tönet ihr Pauken!,* a birthday cantata composed for Electoress Queen Maria Josepha in December 1733
- BWV 215 *Preise dein Glücke*, an homage cantata composed for King Friedrich August II in October 1734
- BWV 248a, a lost sacred cantata composed probably in the fall of 1734 for an unknown occasion
- The St. John Passion, composed in 1724 for Good Friday

Christmas Oratorio movement			**Source movement**
1:1 Jauchzet, frohlocket (Shout for joy!)	SATB chorus	SATB chorus	BWV 214:1 Tönet ihr Pauken (Sound the drums)
1:4 Bereite dich Zion (Prepare yourself, Zion)	A aria	A aria	BWV 213:9 Hercules rejects Pleasure to prepare for kingship
1.8 Grosser Herr (Great Lord)	B aria	B aria	BWV 214:7 Crown of crowned ladies, Queen!
2.15 Frohe Hirten, eilt (Joyful shepherds, hurry)	T aria	A aria	BWV 214:5 Pallas: Let this day be your delight!
2:19 Schlafe, mein Liebster (Sleep, my dearest)	A aria	S aria	BWV 213:3 Pleasure beguiles Hercules as he sleeps
3.24 Herscher des Himmels (Ruler of heaven)	Chorus	Chorus	BWV 214:9 Praise to the queen
3.29 Herr, dein Mitleid (Lord, your compassion)	ST duet	AT duet	BWV 213:11 Hercules pledges allegiance to Virtue
4.36 Fallt mit danken (Fall down with thanksgiving)	SATB chorus	SATB chorus	BWV 213:1 Council of the gods
4:39 Echo Aria	S aria	A aria	BWV 213:5 Hercules asks Echo for guidance
4:41 Ich will nur dir (I will live for your honor)	T aria	T aria	BWV 213:7 Virtue to Hercules: on my wings
5:45 Magi: Where is the king of the Jews?	SATB chorus	SATB chorus	BWV 245:23f We have no king but Caesar
5:47 Erleucht auch mein Sinnen (Enlighten me)	B aria	S aria	BWV 215:7 (revised) The enlightened king needs no weapons
6:54 Herr, wenn die stolzen (When arrogant enemies)	SATB chorus	SATB chorus	BWV 248a
6:56 Du Falscher (You cheat)	B recit		BWV 248a
6:57 Nur ein Wink (A wave of your hand)	S aria		BWV 248a
6:61 So geht! (Go then!)	T recit		BWV 248a
6:62 Nun mögt ihr stolen Feinde (You arrogant enemies)	T aria		BWV 248a
6:63 Was will der Höllen (What will hell's terror do now)	SATB recit	A aria	BWV 245:30 m20 The Judean hero triumphs

Notes on Individual Cantatas

The diagrams for each cantata map the Lutheran stages of Bible study, the eras of salvation history, and the keys of the movements. For key signatures, I include both key names and actual number of sharps or flats in the signature since key signature names of certain recitatives do not match the number of sharps or flats Bach wrote into the signatures. The ascent/descent of musical phrases is based on the number of sharps or flats rather than on the key signature names.

BWV 248:1 Jauchzet, frohlocket, auf, preiset die Tage: Advent and Birth

God's Time. The opening chorus (1) expresses the timeless joy of Christmas, embedding Old Testament (*Psalm 100:1-2, Make a joyful noise unto the Lord/serve the Lord with gladness*), New Testament and Church into eternity.

Phrase I. The evangelist (2) begins with the journey to Bethlehem; the Old Testament prophet (3) reminds the Faithful of the ancient human yearning for the messiah *(A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse)* and the call on Zion to rise up *(Arise o Zion, loose the bonds from your neck).* The Faithful (4) reflect on the Old Testament prophecy even as they themselves prepare for Christmas *(Go forth, o daughter of Zion)*. At the center of the cantata, the chorale (5) —a prayer for comprehension of Christ's birth—is sung to the Phrygian tune *Herzlich tut mich verlangen;* the melody will return at the end of the oratorio transformed into D major, just as the Faithful who engage with the lessons of each cantata are transformed through their understanding of the ultimate meaning of Christ's birth.

Phrase II. The evangelist (6) picks up the story with the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy: the infant is born in the manger. In the combined recitative/chorale *Gelobet seist du, Jesus Christ* (7), the Faithful meditate on the need for Christian humility. From contemplating the human side of Christ born in a stable, the Faithful turn to acknowledging the Christ as divine king (8). The final prayer (9) *Vom himmel hoch*, returns the Faithful to the manger to pray for Christ to find a home in the heart; in scoring the chorale with the instruments from the opening chorus, Bach creates a bridge back to the eternal time of the opening chorus.

Tonality. The Advent phrase descends from the two sharps of the key of D to the Phrygian mode of #5, signaling the descent from the God's divinity to the human prayer for understanding. The second musical phrase ascends from one sharp to two sharps, signaling the ascent from Jesus as human to Jesus as King.

	I. Descent to incarnation					II. Ascent to Jesus as king			
Movement	1. Coro	2. Evan	3. Recit	4. Aria	5. Chor	6. Evan	7. Chor/recit	8. Aria	9. Chor
Stage		1	2	3	4	1	2/4	3	4
Key signature	D ##	b->A ##	A->E ##	a ♮	e phryg ♮	B->G #	G #	D ##	D ##
Era: OT	Ps 100:1-2		Is 11:1-3, 52:2 Arise o Zion	S of S. 3:11 Zion prepare					
Era: NT		Lk 2:1-6 Journey				Lk 2:7 Birth			
Era: Church	Shout for joy		Christ bridegroom of church	Prepare for Christmas	Prayer for comprehension		Mediation on humility	Jesus' divinity	Prayer
					Center				

BWV 248:2 Und es waren Hirten in derselben Gegend: The annunciation to the shepherds

God's Time. The opening *sinfonia* (10) fuses God's time and the time of the nativity with antiphonal choirs of angels (flutes and strings) and shepherds (oboes).

Phrase I. The evangelist's story (11) of the shepherds in the field is interrupted by the Faithful (12) who tell the shepherds the meaning of this birth, who indeed stand on the hillside with them calling for the light to break forth. After the angel sings to the shepherds (13), the Faithful reflect (14) on how the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham *(I will make of you a great nation)* is first told to humble shepherds. The shepherds (15) call on one another to hasten to Bethlehem while the Faithful urge them on from across the centuries. The evangelist (16) tells them about the "sign," and the Faithful (17), in the chorale *Vom himmel hoch*, meditate on the humble birth, the dark stable a metaphor for the world still mired in darkness.

Phrase II. The angel (18) tells the shepherds to go forth, and the shepherds (19) prepare a lullaby for the infant: the sleeping and awakening of Jesus parallel mankind's long sleep on the verge of awakening. The evangelist (20) sings of the heavenly host and the angels, shepherds and the Faithful (21) respond with the Gloria. An angel (22) tells the Faithful to continue to sing, and in the chorale (23), *Vom himmel hoch*, the Faithful are joined by shepherds and angels to sing praises to the "long-desired guest."

Tonality. The key of G (subdominant of D) reflects the humble circumstances of Christ's birth. The first musical phase leads to the C major (subdominant of G) for the center of the cantata, the chorale which signals Christ's descent from heaven to earth. The second phrase returns to G, moving through the shepherds' lullaby to the Gloria and the chorale.

	I Descent from heaven to earthly stable								II Ascent from "going forth" to the Gloria					
Movement	10 Sinf	11 Evan	12 Chor	13 Evan	14 Recit	15 Aria	16 Evan	17 Chor	18 Recit	19 Aria	20 Evan	21 Chor	22 Recit	23 Chor
Stage		1	4	1	2	3	1	4	2	3	1	1	2	4
Key	G #	e->b #	G #	A->b #	G->e #	e #	D #	C ♮	a->G ♮	G #	A->D #	G #	G #	G #
Era: OT					God's promise to Abraham Gen 12:1-4									
Era: Birth	Dialogue between angels & shepherds			Angel Do not fear		Shepherds to each other: Hasten!			Angel: Go forth	Shepherds lullaby		Angels, shepherd sing Gloria		Angels, shepherd
Era: NT		Lk 2:8-9 Shepherds in field		Lk 2:10-12 Angels appear			Lk 2:12 sign				Lk 2:13 Heavenly host	Lk 2:13 Gloria		
Era: Church			Faithful interrupt evangelist		Reflection on shepherds the first told	Faithful urge shepherds		Meditation on humble birth				Faithful sing Gloria	Faithful Go sing	We sing
					Center									

BWV 248:3 *Herrscher des Himmels, erhöre das Lallen:* The shepherds worship at the manger

God's Time. The Faithful (24) and the shepherds stammer their praises to the Lord of the Heavens.

Phrase I. The evangelist (25) sings of the angels leaving and the shepherds (26) finish the *dicta*, stumbling in different directions as they urge each other on, an obbligato flute offering divine guidance. The Old Testament prophet (27) breaks in on their confusion to remind them of God's promise to free Jerusalem (*The Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem*), a parallel to God's promise to free humans. The Faithful (28), responding to Isaiah in the chorale *Gelobet seist,* collectively meditate on God's love and then, as individuals, they (29) meditate on how that love and mercy frees humans from sin; underlying the text is the Lutheran tenet that salvation comes through faith and that faith is a gift of God, not a human achievement.

Phrase II. The evangelist (30) tells about the shepherds at the manger and Mary's pondering. Mary's quiet meditation (31) is a model for the Faithful (32) to reflect on the faith experience and, in the chorale (33) *Warum sollt' ich,* to affirm their faith.

Phrase III. The evangelist (34) finishes the narrative with the shepherds leaving and praising God, and the Faithful (35) sing their own praises in the chorale *Wir Christenleut.* The cantata closes with a repetition of the opening chorus, Faithful still stammering praise, but with new understanding of salvation.

Tonality. Bach returns to the key of D. The first musical phrase ascends from two sharps to three sharps to signal the upward movement toward the message of divine salvation. The second phrase descends toward the human pondering of faith. The ascent to the third musical phase is accomplished using a *fa-mi* shift; that is, the chorale cadence in G (*fa* of D) moves to the cadence on F# (*mi* of D) in the recitative (34). This 17th century device symbolizes the move through the faith experience toward salvation.

		I Ascent to message of divine salvation					II Descent to human faith meditation				III. Ascent to salvation		
Movement	24 Coro	25 Evan	26 Coro	27 Recit	28 Chor	29 Duet	30 Evan	31 Aria	32 Recit	33 Chor	34 Evan	35 Chor	24 Coro
Stage		1	1	2	4	3	1	3	2	4	1	4	
Key	D ##	E->A ##	A->c# ###	c#->A ###	A ##	A ###	f#->b ##	b ##	A->G #	G #	E->F# ##	f# ##	D ##
Era: OT				Prophet to shepherds Is 49:13, 52:9									
Era: Birth	Shepherds		Shepherds Let us go					Mary ponders faith					
Era: NT		Lk 2:15 Angels leave	Lk 2:15				Lk 2:16-19 shepherds find baby in manger				Lk 2:20 shepherds leave		
Era: Church	Faithful praise				Meditaton on God's love	God's mercy			Reflection on faith experience	Individual affirmation of faith		Joy for salvation	Stammering praise

Center

BWV 248:4 Fallt mit Danken, fallt mit Loben: Faith and salvation in Jesus as Word

The cantata is a single musical phrase balanced around the central echo aria. It is all in human time, reflecting the turn toward the New Year and the new era of Christianity. In the opening chorus (36), the Faithful celebrate the New Year and the new era with thanks.

The evangelist (37) briefly states the theme of Jesus' naming and circumcision. The first of two recitative/chorale combinations (38) that surround the central aria is a dialogue between the individual (recitative) and the Church (the *stollen* of a chorale composed by Bach from the theme of the opening movement). Invoking the Prologue of John, the Faithful are reminded that Jesus as the Word has existed since before the beginning of the world. The new relationship with God inaugurated by Christ's birth transforms the human understanding of last things, especially one's own death.

The echo aria (39) draws on a tradition of echo poetry that dates from the 17th century; such poems often described Christ's bride in the forest calling to Jesus and being answered by echo. In this echo aria, the Faithful internalize Jesus as a comforting presence within the heart.

The second recitative, embedded in the *abgesang* of the chorale (40), continues the meditation on Jesus' name. The Faithful (41), in a vigorous fugue, pledge to live for Jesus, and the final chorale (42), also derived from the opening chorus, affirms that collective faith.

Tonality. The fourth cantata, set in the flattest region of the oratorio, emphasizes the human understanding of faith and salvation. The key of F derives from the Lydian mode of 16th century modal theory in which the flat tonality represents the human side of Christ, the mortal with whom a personal relationship is possible. The echo aria at the center is sharper than the surrounding movements to signal the divine presence of Jesus in the human life.

I Ascent to Jesus' presence followed by descent to human affirmation of faith						
Movement	36 Coro	37 Evan	38 Recit/Chor	39 Aria	40 Recit/Chor	41 Aria	42 Chor
Stage		1	2/4	3	2/4	3	4
Key	F ♭	C->a ♭	d>C ♭	C ♮	G->F ♭	d ♭	F ♭
Era: NT		Lk 2:21 naming & circumcision	Jn 1:1 Jesus as the Word				
Era: Church	Fall down with thanks		Reflection on Jesus' name	Meditation on Jesus' presence represented by Echo	Reflection on Jesus' name	Individual affirmation of faith	Collective affirmation and prayer
				Center			

BWV 248:5 Ehre sei dir, Gott, gesungen: Jesus as Light

God's Time. The fifth cantata opens with the Faithful (43) singing a timeless glory to God.

Phrase I. The evangelist (44) takes up the nativity story with the Magi at the court of King Herod; the Magi themselves (45) sing their question—Where is the newborn King of the Jews?—to four bars that parody a chorus in the Saint John Passion ("We have no king but Caesar.") The musical reference links the nativity to the Passion and also underscores the kingship of Jesus. The answer to the Magi's question comes not from Herod but from Mary who quotes the Old Testament *(Arise, shine, for your light has come)* to associate the star with the light bringing salvation. The Faithful join her, reflecting on Jesus as the light of the world who has always been present, a reference to the Prologue of John. The chorale *In dich hab' ich gehoffet, Herr* (46) is a collective meditation on light and darkness, and the following aria (47) an individual prayer for light and enlightenment.

Phrase II. The evangelist (48) begins to describe Herod's specific fear, but is interrupted by Mary and the Faithful, (49) who reflect on the appropriate Christian response to fear; the evangelist (50) continues with Herod anxiously questioning the priests. The anxiety and yearning of the Faithful (51) are answered by Mary's reassurance that Christ is already here. The Faithful here are like Simeon and Anna who await the messiah and will learn in due time that He has arrived (Luke 2:25-32). With the reassurance, the Faithful (52) offer their hearts as home for Jesus, and the closing chorale *Gott des Himmels und der Erde* (53) affirms that Jesus' light enters the dark heart through grace.

Tonality. The key of A (dominant of D), the sharpest key of the oratorio, symbolizes the divine light. In each of the two musical phrases there is a descent to a center that is flatter than surrounding movements; each center reflects human anxiety and hope.

Movement	I Descent to human questioning, ascent to light					II Descent to human anxiety, ascent to light					
	43 Coro	44 Evan	45 Chor/Recit	46 Chor	47 Aria	48 Evan	49 Recit	50 Evan	51 Tercetto	52 Recit	53 Chor
Stage		1	1/4, 2/4	4	3	1	2	1	3	2	4
Key	A ###	f#->b ###	b->C# ##	f#->A ###	f# ###	E->c# ###	c#->E ###	E–>b ###	b ##	C#–>A ###	A ###
Era: OT			Isaiah 60:1 Arise								
Era: Birth			Magi: where? Mary: here				Mary (to Herod & to faithful): why fear?		Simeon: When? Mary: Now		
Era: NT		Mt 2:1 Magi to Herod	Jn 1:9	Jn 1:5		Mt 2:3 Herod's fear		Mt 2:3-6 Herod questions priests	Jn 1:1		Jn 1:9
Era: Church	Glory to God		Reflection on Jesus' eternal presence	Meditation on light and darkness	Prayer for light and enlightenment		Faithful interrupt evangelist: fear		Meditation hope and assurance	Meditation affirming resolution	Meditation light within one's heart
			Center 1						Center 2		

BWV 248:6 *Herr, wenn die stolzen Feinde schnauben:* **Christ's victory over death and human faith in the face of enemies**

God's Time. The opening chorus (54) is a long fugue extolling God who defeats arrogant enemies.

Phrase I. The evangelist (55) tells of Herod's deceit and the Faithful (56) reflect on that deception. The Faithful then (57) answer the problem of evil deception by affirming the strength of the Lord as a protector from arrogant enemies. The text of the aria reflects the last part of the Magnificat (*He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts*), which links this final cantata to the conception, circling back to the real beginning of the nativity story.

Phrase II. The evangelist (58) sings of the Magi worshipping Jesus with gifts and the Faithful (59) sing the chorale *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein*, placing themselves at the manger, offering their own gifts.

Phrase III. The evangelist (60) concludes the nativity story with the Magi leaving. The Faithful (61) reflect on Jesus as the Church's bridegroom; the text, referring to the Song of Solomon, plus Bach's oboe scoring creates a bridge to the third movement recitative of the first cantata. The Faithful (62) affirm their faith in their protector who triumphs over enemies and then reaffirm (63) that faith with a melody that connects the nativity to the Passion and the birth of Christ with his victory over death (SJP, #31 m 20): "The Judean hero triumphs in the battle." In the closing chorale (64), the Faithful celebrate Jesus' perpetual presences as protector and refuge. Bach fits the Phrygian melody *Herzlich thut mich verlangen* into the triumphal key of D, using the scoring of the opening chorus, returning the Faithful simultaneously to that triumphal chorus and to the distance traveled from the first appearance of the chorale melody in the first cantata where it was a prayer for comprehension. The circle is completed as the mystery of Christ's birth is transformed into the Christ's victory over death and the forces of evil.

Tonality. The structure of the cantata is chiastic, the only one of the six to balance movements symmetrically around the center (59) where the Faithful affirm their presence at the manger. The first phrase ascends to the reflection on the strength of the Lord, the second descends to the manger scene, and the third ascends to Christ the Victorious.

	I Ascent to Lord the protector				II Descent to manger		III. Ascent to Christ Victorious				
Movement	54 Chor	55 Evan	56 Recit	57 Aria	58 Evan	59 Choral	60 Evan	61 Recit	62 Aria	63 Recit	64 Choral
Stage		1	2	3	1	4	1	2	3	2	4
Key	D ##	E–>D ##	b–>A ##	c# ###	f#–>G ##	G #	b–>C# ##	f#–>b ##	b ##	A–>D ##	D ##
Era: OT								S. of S. 3:11			
Era: birth		Herod speaks deceitfully									
Era: NT	Lk 1:51-52	Mt 2:7-8 Herod to Magi		Lk 1:51-52	Mt 2:9-11 Magi in Bethlehem		Mt 2:12 Magi leave				
Era: Church	Faithful: God defeats enemies (stolzen Feinde)		Reflection on Herod's deception	Reflection on strength of Lord (Feinde stolz)		Faithful affirm their presence at manger		Reflection on Jesus as bridegroom	Affirmation of Jesus protector (stolzen Feinde)	Reflection on triumph over enemies	Christ triumphs over our enemies: death, devil, sin, hell
	1	2	3		4	Center	4	3		2	1

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The ideas in these conductor's notes are a synthesis of a number of different scholarly viewpoints. Not all of the following books include reflections on the Christmas Oratorio, but I have applied analyses of other Bach works to the Oratorio.

Berger, Karol. *Bach's Cycle, Mozart's Arrow* (2007)
Bossuyt, Ignace. *J.S. Bach: Christmas Oratorio* (2004)
Chafe, Eric. *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (2000) and *Tonal Allegory in the Cantatas of J.S. Bach* (1991)
Durr, Alfred. *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach* (2005) and *J.S. Bach's Saint John Passion* (2000)
Leaver, Robin. "The Mature Works and Their Theological and Liturgical Context" in *Cambridge Companion to Bach* (1997)
Marshall, Robert. *The Compositional Process of J.S. Bach, Volumes 1 and 2* (1972)
Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Bach Among the Theologians* (1980)
Whittaker, Giles. *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach* (1959)

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