

JONATHAN GAISMAN

Acts of remembrance

Commemorating those lost in the pandemic has not been possible. But we can mourn through music

Whatever the true number of people who have died of the Covid virus, or with it, a time may come when we wish properly to commemorate their passing. Some of us have lost friends, for whom in the present constrained circumstances an appropriate funerary tribute has not been possible. In whatever form this is offered when the time comes, it seems unlikely that the authorities will take the course of previous ages, and commission the composition of a suitable musical memorial. Perhaps the greatest musical act of remembrance was the Requiem written by Verdi for his friend, the writer Alessandro Manzoni. Another well-known example of the genre is the Masonic Funeral Music K477, composed for a memorial service dedicated to two of Mozart's Masonic brethren, Duke Georg August of Mecklenburg-Strelitz and Count Franz Esterházy von Galántha. In a different idiom, there is the violin concerto composed "to the memory of an angel" by Berg on the death of the 18-year-old Manon Gropius.

One of the earlier instances of the form, and less well-known than the three cases cited above, is the cantata (BWV198) composed in 1727 by Johann Sebastian Bach, on the death of Christiane Eberhardine, the wife of Augustus II the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland. The great majority of Bach's cantatas are purely religious works, composed for particular days in the church calendar, but secular interlopers occasionally occur, such as the so-called Coffee cantata and the Peasant cantata. Of greater stature than these appealing pieces is the Trauer-Ode (literally mourning ode) composed for Augustus' consort. It is exceptional, even by the standards of Bach's mature cantatas.

The city of Dresden must constitute, in more mobile times at least, the ideal long weekend destination. Notorious for one of the worst delinquencies committed by the Allies in the 1939-45 war, it has been impeccably restored so as to convey a vivid impression of the golden era which it enjoyed in the early 18th century under Augustus's rule. What the rulers of Saxony lacked in



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military muscle, they made up for in extravagant display. According to the verdict of the peripatetic Baron Pöllnitz in 1729, it was "the most dazzling court in Europe". Tim Blanning, biographer of Frederick the Great, reminds us that Augustus's famous ambition to make Dresden the Venice of the north is illustrated by the way in which the dome of the Frauenkirche echoes that of Santa Maria della Salute on the Grand Canal, and by the visual record of the German city created by Bellotto, which mirrors and perhaps surpasses the more famous Venetian views of his uncle Antonio Canaletto. Simon Winder, in his entertaining book *Germania*, grants that Augustus made Dresden into a great centre of patronage and courtly life, but—for all the palaces and churches, the largest opera house north of the Alps, a premier division picture collection, and an astonishing hoard of gems and precious objects in the so-called Green Vault (recently depleted by a daring theft)—he concludes that the results were ultimately ruinous. "He embroiled Poland in disastrous wars, frittered his money away on bits of amber and ivory, fathered over 300 children, did a party piece involving tearing apart a horse-shoe with his bare hands, and left Saxony helpless and indebted to an eye-watering degree." In the later 18th century, under his son, the unpromisingly-nicknamed Augustus III the Fat, Saxony was no match for the expanding Prussia.

Christiane Eberhardine had enjoyed universal veneration in Protestant Saxony (the very seat of the German Reformation) for having not joined in her husband's cynical conversion to Catholicism, undertaken (in the spirit of the Henri IV of France) in order to acquire the Polish crown. On her death, a Leipzig student, Carl von Kirchbach, sought permission for a mourning ode in her praise to be performed in that city's university church, the Paulinerkirche, with music by Bach. Bach had lived in Leipzig since 1723, working as Cantor at the Thomaskirche, but the university wanted the music to be composed by its own music director Johann Gottlieb Görner. Fortunately, Kirchbach was adamant that it must be Bach, but one consequence, which Alfred Dürr calls "both shameful and amusing", was that Bach was asked to sign a declaration stating that the commission would not set a precedent for Görner's rights to be abused in the future. No doubt they were not, but Bach did not sign.

The text of the ode, by Johann Christoph Gottsched, is fairly described by John Eliot Gardiner as "an insipid pot-pourri of banalities, mawkish sentiments and bathetic rhymes". For example, the performers are asked to sing: "Your Saxony, your dismayed Meissen/grow numb at your royal tomb;/ the eye weeps, the tongue cries:/My grief can be called indescribable! . . . Your Torgau wears mourning dress,/your Pretzsch grows weak, stiff and dull." There is much more of the same—no fewer than nine eight-line stanzas—but as is so often the way, Bach's music (the ten movements of which sensibly ignore, indeed savage the text's strophic scheme) transforms a feeble literary effort into something dignified, atmospheric and profoundly moving.

It is sometimes said that the major mode is used by composers to convey happy music and the minor sad. This is usually an oversimplification and often simply untrue. Schubert typically slips into the major to heighten the sense of pathos; in *Winterreise*, for example, this is its principal function. Conversely, Bach often writes in minor keys to evoke a mood of vigorous intellectual activity, as in the preludes to the second or third English keyboard suites; and no one could misunderstand the jesting quality of the celebrated *badinerie* which concludes the second (B minor) orchestral suite. Yet Bach also used the minor mode to compose music of the deepest sorrow. The second partita in C minor offers both: it begins with an architectonic *grave adagio* which is like a funeral monument, but ends with an infectious *capriccio* (still in the same key), whose leaping tenths encourage the listener to get up and dance.

Robert Avery, founder of Habsburg Heritage, who passed away this year from Covid-19

Music



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Nowhere did Bach (or anyone else) explore the mourning qualities inherent in the minor more completely or effectively than in his Passion music. In the first movement of the cantata for Christiane (“*Laß, Fürstin, laß noch einen Strahl!*”), we are in the same sound-world as the opening chorus of the St Matthew Passion, a work which also dates from 1727. This is due partly to the rich orchestration; partly to the delayed entry of the choir, and to the way in which its drooping or sinuous lines are punctuated by plangent commentaries on the flutes and oboes d’amore. The vivid pictorialism of the larger work is also echoed in the remarkable fourth movement of the cantata (“*Der Glocken bebendes Getön*”), in which woodwind and plucked strings (including a pair of lutes) evoke differently-sized funeral bells, from the flutes in the treble to the sonorous tolling of the violas da gamba.

Gardiner reserves especial praise for the “astonishing” harmonic as well as aural effects achieved in just 11 bars, which is all that this *recitativo* comprises. The gamba or wind scoring of the cantata’s arias is no less delicate, and recalls the technique in the Passion of highlighting a particular instrumental coloration in each movement. (A contemporary account mentions that the cantata required recorders as well, though

Bach scholar and ragtime champion Joshua Rifkin thinks that this may have been a mistake.) And just as the Matthew Passion ends with a slow sarabande, so the cantata closes with a curious fusion of dance form and threnody, albeit in a less massive and inconsolable register than in the larger work. It should be no surprise to anyone who is acquainted with this music—a fact which stands as an index of its quality—that Bach later redepicted several pieces from the cantata BWV198 for inclusion in his lost St Mark’s Passion, in which the first movement was now set to the words “*Geh, Jesu, geh zu deiner Pein*”.

Augustus’s seat Dresden was a favourite destination of one particular, much-missed victim of the present pandemic. Robert Avery, who died on 10th April was the founder of and animating spirit in Habsburg Heritage, a company which specialised in musical and cultural trips to central Europe; its aficionados travelled with him again and again. Robert, who was equally at home in a Palladian villa, an Esterházy palace, a Burgenland synagogue, a mass in Eisenstadt and a Thuringian sausage-stall, would have pulled a wry face at appearing in an essay alongside Sebastian

Bach. His eclecticism was endearing and inexhaustible: the programme for a recent Ring cycle in the Dresden Semperoper was interleaved on nights off with Yo-Yo Ma’s performance of all six Bach cello suites in the Frauenkirche and a performance of Avery’s beloved *Die tote Stadt* by Korngold. (Wagner would not have approved.)

If our present circumstances have taught us anything about music, it is that its ideal realisation depends on a mysterious congruence of three forces in the same physical space: the composer, the performer and the audience. Though the hierarchy of these constituents ranks the listener far below the performer who is in turn far inferior to the composer, all three are mutually interdependent. Live-streaming is all very well, and far better than nothing, but it is not the real thing. The original performers of Bach’s funeral cantata were given almost no time to rehearse, as the mere two-day period between his completion of the score (marked on the autograph) and the date of the mourning service will have been further shortened by the need to write out the individual parts. May there soon and eternally be reunited performers such as those who rose to the challenge in October 1727, composers—of whom the zenith is J.S. Bach—and listeners of the calibre of Robert Avery. Such is music. **■**

The dome of the Frauenkirche, Dresden, designed to echo that of Santa Maria della Salute, Venice