

## Oberlin Cantata Project: Bach Vespers at the Church of the Covenant (Nov. 5)

by Daniel Hathaway



Johann Sebastian Bach's 200 surviving church cantatas (some think he may have written even more) usually get performed out of context in modern times. Fifth-year Oberlin student Matt Bickett and friends created the Oberlin Cantata Project to surround one of these important works with other liturgical music that would have been experienced

in the same service by Bach's congregations in Leipzig. Bickett also wanted to perform the music with the same kind of small student ensembles the Cantor would have had to draw on during his tenure there from 1723 to 1750.

That initiative, inspired by the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, resulted in three performances last weekend in Oberlin and Cleveland. The first two were in concert format, but the third, on Sunday afternoon, November 5 at the Church of the Covenant, took the shape of a Reformation Sunday Vespers service during Bach's time, complete with readings, prayers, congregational responses, and an attenuated sermon. Most of those elements were presented in the original German.

Bickett assembled a chorus of eight singers and a small orchestra of period instruments underpinned by a continuo section of cellos, bass, organ, harpsichord, and theorbo. The performing forces filled the rear gallery of the church where the 17th century-style Richards, Fowkes & Company organ stands and sings out mightily down the nave.

The 90-minute service began with carillon music played by George Leggiero, followed by Bach's C-Major Prelude, BWV 545, and an introit (Pachelbel's *Gott ist unser*

*Zuversicht*), reflecting Leipzig's practice of singing an old-style motet at the beginning of the service.

The *Kyrie* and *Gloria* of the Lutheran Mass followed — in plainsong settings and in music by Luther and Nikolaus Decius — preceded by a Bach organ prelude, *Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit*, BWV 669.

The Collect, Epistle, and Gospel were read in German by the Rev. Susanne Carter, separated by the congregational hymn *Ein feste Burg*, elaborately accompanied by Covenant music director and Oberlin organ professor Jonathan Moyer. (An occasional E-Major chord on the meantone-tempered organ added astringency.)

Dietrich Buxtehude's cantata *Alles was ihr tut* preceded the creed and the sermon, a selection of excerpts from Luther's 1518 "Sermon on Indulgences and Grace," delivered (helpfully in English) by the Rev. Ken Jones.

The main event of the afternoon, Bach's cantata *Ein feste Burg*, BWV 80, received a festive performance by soloists and the four *ripieno* singers. The outstanding aria and recitative soloists were soprano Theodora Nestorova, countertenor Joe Schlesinger, tenor Ben Martin, and bass Matthew Payne, and oboist Eduardo Sepulveda took a fine obbligato turn on a rare instrument, the *oboe da caccia*.

The service ended in a way Bach's might not have — with a Concerto of dance movements by Georg Muffat — but the ensemble played its Allemanda, Grave, Gavotta, and Menuet stylishly.

The service was richly documented in program notes by Albert Bellefeuille, who also served as rehearsal accompanist and keyboard continuo, providing extra insight into how Bach's church cantatas fit into a larger liturgical context. That experience was rare and interesting, and the "congregation" gamely played their parts, even if phrases like "der mit dem Vater und dem Sohne zugleich angebetet und zugleich geehret wird, der durch die Propheten geredet hat" may have twisted English-speaking tongues.

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