

# EPILOGUE

In 1997 I was very interested in the Bible text and therefore created a synopsis (a gospel harmony) from all four Gospels - so at this time without any musical intention. While often reading it later I realised that the Christmas story was previously never set to music by the pure Gospel text in such detail. The first outline in choruses, arias, ensembles, recitatives and chorales seemed very promising immediately. A colourful and varied picture arose inserting the choruses and chorales at suitable places. So finally there were 70 numbers.

Nine respectively ten choirs (opening chorus no. 1 and the final chorus no. 70 are only differently texted), so it is six respectively seven mixed choruses, one women's chorus, two men's choruses

Seven chorales

Thirty-two recitatives for Tenor 1 (Evangelist)

Twenty-one Solos (Arias), three for Soprano (Maria), three for Alto (Elisabeth), nine for Tenor 2 (Archangel) and six for Bass (two for Zacharias, two for Simeon, one for King Herod and one for John the Baptist in chorus no. 38)

Two ensembles: the Solo Quartet in Chorus no. 41 and the Men's Trio no. 57 (Holy Three Kings)

The large Choruses Nos. 1, 38, 41 and 70 with the text from the prologue of John the Evangelist constitute the spiritual connection.

The Angel Chorus no. 45 is the sonic climax.

The work can be performed either as a whole without a break or in two parts (Advent and Christmas) with an intermission between Chorus no. 38 and Chorale no. 39.

(90 minutes or 45 minutes each)

Especially in the recitatives (accompanied by cello and organ continuo), but also in the other parts the tone and word painting was important to me, which can be easily empathised in most cases.

In composing the solo pieces, it seemed vital to tune the instrumentation, timbre and keys to the characters of the characters or the text passages.

The whole of the first part up to and including chorus No. 38 tells the prehistory of the birth of Jesus; the smaller portions always culminate in a choral. (No. 1 - 10: The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, No. 11 - 21: The announcement of the birth of Jesus, No. 22 - 28 Mary's Visitation to Elisabeth, No. 29 - 38 The birth of John the Baptist)

The first fugue subject of the opening chorus no. 1 returns into itself and therefore includes audibly "everything" (respectively the "Heart of the Father" in the final chorus no. 70). The second fugue subject is very flexible, therefore symbolises both lives in the opening chorus and the Holy Spirit in the final chorus. The low a cappella-passage ends in a diminished seventh chord (the darkness has not recognised the word - the „logos“, Christ). Instead of that, the angels serve him, and Father and Son are one.

The two trumpets in the angel's pieces Nos. 3, 7 and 12 and the recitative no. 22 symbolise the angel's wings, as the two French horns in the angel apparitions in the dreams of Joseph (no. 23, 64 and 68). Of course, it suits best to accompany with the harp; in this case without an "earthly" bass instrument to indicate the celestial sphere.

The old Zacharias is accompanied by two bassoons underlined by the double bass as a continuo instrument. The Benedictus - the canticle of Zechariah - is divided into two parts by an instrumental interlude due to the length. (Nos. 5 and 34 in A Minor)

For Elisabeth, I chose the Dorian key and two violas the violoncello as a bass instrument and for the first time followed by also Dorian Chorale no. 10, whose second verse is a Bass-Cantus firmus. (Nos. 9, 25 and 30)

For Maria, in the Magnificat two violins seemed best to support the oboe with the Gregorian Magnificat-Cantus firmus. Since Mary occupies a position between heaven and earth, I have decided for the Viola as "bass instrument" and the bass part deliberately kept in the range of the viola. (No. 16 in D minor; no. 20 in C minor and no. 27 in F major)

Chorale no. 21 has also got the melody in the bass in the second verse. In the chorales of the first part, the obbligato instruments are oboe (Nos. 10 and 21) and French horns (no. 28) to express the longing for the coming of the Messiah. Both Turba Choruses no. 32 in D minor and no. 36 in A Minor are accompanied only by basso continuo respectively two additional violins.

The chorus no. 38 in D major with the bass solo (John the Baptist) in the middle part concludes the first part.

The real Christmas story takes place in the second part, which takes about the same length as the first, although it has got fewer numbers.

(No. 39 - 49 The birth of Jesus, No. 50 - 55 The Presentation in the Temple, No. 56 - 62 The visit of the Magi, No 63 - 70 The flight to Egypt)

I took the well-known setting of Michael Praetorius as opening chorale of the second part (no. 39) and extended it to instrumental parts.

The very first recitative no. 40th briefly portrays the Nativity.

This is followed by chorus no. 41 in D major, which interprets this salvation spiritually with the words of John the Evangelist. The solo quartet in the middle section deals with the problem of mankind who is either inclined to accept the offer of salvation or just unfortunately not.

In No. 43 in G major a magnificent Seraph with six wings (with 2 trumpets, horns and trombones) appears to the shepherds and announces the birth of the Saviour to them, followed by the angelic choir No. 45 in D major, in which all groups of instruments - symbolizing both the ladder to heaven and the ascending and rising of small and large angels - accompany the singing of the choir.

The three-part male chorus of shepherds no. 47 in D minor with the two treble recorders (alternatively possibly with two oboes) and the bassoon forms a strong contrast in its simplicity.

The Chorale No. 49 devotes itself - by the two horns somewhat reluctant - to the worship of the Divine Child in the manger.

In the temple the aged Simeon (No. 51 in G minor and No. 53 in C minor) - his power of belief is symbolised by two trombones - confirms Jesus to be the Messiah.

In choral No. 55, the Christmas spirit breaks through with trumpets and tympani and angels singing Alleluia.

In Trio no. 57 in D Minor I used the Judeo-Sephardic scale whereby the Magi phonetically strut along as on ambling camels of an oriental caravan. In the end, the oboe and two bassoons play around the soloists in Arab-heterophony manner.

First hesitantly and then more confident and finally triumphantly the choir of the chief priests and scribes No. 59 in A Minor - majestically accompanied by horns and trombones - confirms the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem.

Comparatively, the appearance of King Herod No. 61 in D major with trumpets and tympani seems superficial and hypocritical; the accompaniment ideally is accomplished by Regal (regalis = Royal) and contrabassoon.

Choral No. 62 - the aforementioned setting by Praetorius - has got a new text and is an expression of reverence and adoration of the three kings.

The angel's warning the Holy Family (no. 64 in C minor) is followed by the female chorus no. 66 in F minor, the shattering inconsolable lament of Jewish mothers after the murder of their children by Herod in Bethlehem.

The angel's request to return to Israel (No. 68 in C major) is joined by the final and prophetic recitative No. 69. The final chorus No. 70 - musically identical with the opening chorus except the added harp, which symbolises heaven and earth having been touched by the birth of the Savior - is a future outlook in the history of salvation and ensures the substantial unity.

Edt bei Lambach, February 2011

Michael Stenov