

Bach's First Köthen Serenata BWV 66a – a Reconstruction

When Johann Sebastian Bach finally entered the service of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen after Christmas 1717, it was too late for any contribution of the composer to the yearly celebration of the prince's birthday.¹ Only on 10 December 1718, Bach had the opportunity to show all his art and inspiration in the usual birthday Serenata, which had to be especially splendid in that year, because Prince Leopold had invited nobility from the neighbourhood as well as from Stuttgart to join him for a courtly festival of several weeks. Among the guests, there were fervent music lovers like his brother-in-law, Duke Ernest August of Sachsen-Weimar, or Friedrich Ludwig, Hereditary Prince of Württemberg. For the musical entertainment of those connoisseurs, prominent soloists had been invited, like the bassist or rather baritone Johann Gottfried Riemschneider from the opera in Hamburg, who sang in Handel's London opera ensemble in 1729/30 and had a voice range from A to g',² or the violinist Johann Gottfried Vogler. These guest musicians as well as the exquisite court musicians of Prince Leopold, had to show off their qualities in Bach's first Köthen Serenata, "Der Himmel dacht auf Anhalts Ruhm und Glück", BWV 66a.

Although the musical sources of this work have long been lost, the text by the famous poet Menantes alias Christian Friedrich Hunold has been preserved in a vast printed collection of celebratory poetry, published in Halle between 1719 and 1721.³ This print clearly names the genre of the piece, SERENATA, and the original title *Das frolockende Anhalt (Exultant Anhalt)*. It consists mainly of a long dialogue between the allegorical figures of *Die Glückseligkeit Anhalts* ("The Bliss of Anhalt") and *Fama* ("Fame"). As the Bach scholar Friedrich Smend discovered already in 1951, Bach reused the final chorus of that Serenata, the first aria and the duet as sacred parodies in his first Leipzig cantata for Easter Monday, "Erfreut euch, ihr Herzen", BWV 66.⁴ He even used part of the recitativos and the long arioso dialogues between the two allegorical figures in the sacred cantata, transforming the latter into normal solo parts for Alto and Tenor respectively.

Therefore, central passages of BWV 66a can be reconstructed on the basis of BWV 66 and its autograph score D-B Mus.ms. Bach P 73. However, despite all the material contained in that Easter cantata, several recitativo passages of the Serenata are still missing, as well as the second aria, "Beglücktes Land von süßer Ruh und Stille". However, in 1996 Joshua Rifkin proposed a fascinating theory concerning this piece:⁵ Bach might have reused this aria a year after BWV 66, in April 1725, when he composed his cantata BWV 42 for the first Sunday

¹ Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2000, p. 207.

² Hans-Joachim Marx, „Riemschneider, Johann Gottfried“, in: *Das Händel Lexikon*, Laaber; Laaber Verlag 2011, p. 634-635.

³ „Das frolockende Anhalt / als der Durchlauchtigste Fürst und Herr / Herr Leopold / Fürst zu Anhalt Cöthen / Hertzog zu Sachsen / A. 1718. den 10. Decembr. den Höchst-erfreulichen Geburtst-Tag bey des gantzen Fürstenthums blühenden Wohlstand begieng. Menantes. Serenata. 1. Die Glückseligkeit Anhalts/2. Fama.“, in: *Auserlesene und theils noch nie gedruckte Gedichte unterschiedener Berühmten und geschickten Maenner. [...] Zwölftes Stück*. Halle im Magdeburgischen 1719. I. Abtheilung: Lob- und Glückwünschungs-Gedichte. Nr. I, p. 84-90.

⁴ Friedrich Smend, *Bach in Köthen*, Berlin: Christlicher Zeitschriftenverlag Berlin 1951, p. 34-39. Cp. Alfred Dürr, Critical report for BWV 66a, in: *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*, Serie I, Band 34, Kassel-Basel: Bärenreiter 1963, p. 59-61.

⁵ Joshua Rifkin, "Verlorene Quellen, verlorene Werke. Miscellen zu Bachs Instrumentalkomposition", in: *Bachs Orchesterwerke. Bericht über das 1. Dortmunder Bach-Symposion*, Witten 1997: Klangfarben Musikverlag, p. 65-68.

after Easter, transforming it into the wonderful alto aria “Wenn zwei und drei versammelt sind in Jesu teurem Namen”. Rifkin demonstrated that the text underlay of the aria from the Köthen Serenata worked perfectly well with the music from BWV 42. The content of the original text also explains the very special musical lay out of that aria with its calm and peaceful music for the two oboes, sustained by long string chords, so perfectly illustrating the original text “Beglücktes Land von süßer Ruh und Stille”. In Menantes’ libretto, this aria is not specifically assigned to any of the two characters of the Serenata, but its text clearly refers to the welfare of Anhalt. Therefore, in our version, this aria is also assigned to *Die Glückseeligkeit Anhalts*.

Joshua Rifkin also proposed that the Sinfonia from BWV 42 originally belonged to BWV 66a. This is not only suggested by the beautiful fair copy of this movement contained in the autograph score of BWV 42, D-B Mus.ms. Bach P 55, but also by its scoring for two oboes, bassoon and string orchestra with basso continuo, and by its Da Capo form so typical of Bach’s concerto movements written in Köthen.

Adding all those movements from BWV 66 and 42 together, one gets the impression that BWV 66a must have been an especially long and virtuosic Serenata, a show piece of Bach’s abilities as well of those of his performers. Given the fact that the bassist Riemschneider was by far the highest paid performer of those festivities in Köthen and that he stayed there for several weeks,⁶ our reconstruction reserves the greatest share of the music for the solo bass. The first aria, “Traget ihr Lüffte den Jubel von hinnen” was doubtlessly a bass aria already in Köthen: There is not the slightest clue of any transposition flaws in Bach’s Leipzig fair copy of that aria in BWV 66. On the contrary, the alto aria from BWV 42 shows several transposition errors, one of which Rifkin interpreted as a hint to an earlier bass version of that piece.⁷ Even the duet for alto and tenor from BWV 66 might suggest in several small details that it was originally intended for bass, either with tenor or soprano. For our reconstruction of the whole Serenata, we decided to combine a bass in the role of *Die Glückseeligkeit Anhalts* with a tenor in the role of *Fama*. The latter could as well have been a soprano, of course.

As Bach did not use all of the recitativos and arioso passages from BWV 66a in the Leipzig Easter cantata BWV 66, several of those parts of the Serenata are lost and had to be newly composed by Jörn Boysen. He also contributed a new *recitativo con stromenti* as the central section of the aria “Beglücktes Land”. In the Berlin score of BWV 42, it is obvious that Bach wrote the A section of “Wo zwei und drei” as a neat fair copy, whereas the central section was newly composed in 1725 in his usual draft manner. Therefore, we have decided to

⁶ Cp. the entry from 16 December 1718 in the financial records of the Köthen court. On this day Bach received a sum of 78 Thaler in order to pay out the guest musicians for the birthday celebrations. Whereas the violinists Linigke from Merseburg and Vogler from Leipzig received 16 Thaler each and the soprano singer Preese got 9 Thaler, Riemschneider “after being here for several weeks” was paid the amount of 40 Thaler. Landesarchiv Sachsen-Anhalt, 03.02.03. Z 73, Köthener Kammerrechnungen 1718-1719 (fol. 29v.-30r.), Dezember 1718: „16. Vor den einige Wochen hier gewesenenen Bassisten Riemschneider zur Discretion 40,-.“

⁷ The one transposition fault Rifkin mentioned is to be found near the end of the first part of the aria in bar 39, when the alto sings “(mitten) ein” with a small coloratura on d-f sharp-e etc. Bach wrote the first three notes obviously in the bass clef and then corrected the error by rewriting them in the alto clef. I found two more of these items: In bar 23, the thick note head on the a seems to suggest that Bach wrote it originally one tone lower in the bass clef, possibly also the following b. In bar 32, Bach wrote the first note of the tone repetition on d' correctly in the alto clef, but for the second d he switched unwillingly into the bass clef.

rewrite the central section of that aria in BWV 66a as a recitativo with stormy string accompaniment.

It is obvious that our reconstruction of BWV 66a differs fundamentally from the one Alexander Ferdinand Grychtolik has published and recorded in 2013.⁸ He decided in favour of soprano and alto for the two solo parts, and he did not follow Joshua Rifkin's suggestions concerning the Sinfonia and the alto aria from BWV 42, but used other pieces instead. In contrast to his theory that the Serenata BWV 66a was performed in the grand hall of the Köthen palace, I would rather suggest that its half-scenic performance took place in the old Orangery of the Köthen gardens, turned into a theatre with stage sets for the performances of spoken plays. A troupe of German actors used that building as their theatre during the weeks of the birthday celebrations in December 1718. Taking into account how many guests would have belonged to the entourages of Leopold's prominent guests, and how much space would have been needed for Bach's orchestra, it might have seemed more comfortable to use the larger space of the old Orangery and its stage for the performance of the Serenata.

When performed in our version, Bach's debut as a composer of Serenatas in Köthen appears as an unusually long piece of more than 45 minutes, containing a Sinfonia, two arias, a duet and the final chorus, all in extended Da Capo forms, connected by long, substantial dialogues in recitativo and arioso. With our reconstruction, we do hope to convey the festive mood and the fervour of vocal and instrumental virtuosity in Bach's first Köthen Serenata. We also tried to reconstruct the original musical imagery connected to the music from BWV 66 and 42: visions of well-being, prosperity and peace in a small princely state in the middle of Germany and the praise of a wise ruler. At the first performance of our reconstruction in Milan on 16 December 2023, the Italian audience appreciated both aspects of the Serenata, for which Carlo Vitali had provided a wonderful Italian translation.

We want to thank all the people who have contributed to this reconstruction, from its first preliminary version presented in Den Haag in 2018 up to this final solution, first performed in Milan in 2023. Our special thanks go to the musicians of *La Risonanza* and the singers who shared our enthusiasm for Bach's first Köthen Serenata with so much passion and relentless energy.

Karl Böhmer and Fabio Bonizzoni

⁸ Johann Sebastian Bach, *Der Himmel dacht' auf Anhalts Ruhm und Glück (BWV 66a). Glückwunsch-Serenata zum Geburtstag des Fürsten Leopold von Anhalt-Köthen (10. Dezember 1718)*, herausgegeben von (Rekonstruktion) Alexander Grychtolik, Beeskow: Ortus Musikverlag.