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One Verse, Two Settings, and Three Strange Youths^{*}

Celebrated few weeks after Bach's appointment at Leipzig, on July 2nd, 1723 the Feast of the Visitation gave the new Kantor the chance to compose and perform his Latin *Magnificat* (E-flat major version, BWV 243a). The following year the same Feast offered him the opportunity to present *Meine Seel erhebt den Herren* (BWV 10), a cantata whose text is part a translation and part a paraphrase of the *Canticum Mariae*, found in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke:

Magnificat anima mea Dominum,
et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo,

quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae.

Ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes
generationes,

Mein Seele erhebt Gott den Herrn
Und mein Geist freuet sich in Gott, meinem
Heiland.

Denn er hat mich, seine geringe Magd,
angesehen;

Darum werden mich seligpreisen Kindeskinde
ewiglich.

^{*} In the present article I will try to expand the analysis of Bach's Cantata *Meine Seel erhebt den Herren* (BWV 10) presented in chapter 4 of my book *Fra Kantor e Canticum. Bach e il Magnificat* (Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2011). The wish to enrich my analysis stemmed out of my participation to the 18th-century sacred-music session of Musics, Cultures, Identities within the 19th Congress of the International Musicological Society (Rome, 1-7 July, 2012). Following the Congress, an important study of this cantata appeared in print: MARK A. PETERS, *J.S. Bach's "Meine Seel erhebt den Herren" (BWV 10) as Chorale Cantata and Magnificat Paraphrase*, «Bach: Journal of the Riemenschneider Institute», XLIII, 1 (2012), pp. 29-64. Referring to Andreas Glöckner's seminal article on the liturgical destination of Bach's E-flat Magnificat (ANDREAS GLÖCKNER, *Bachs Es-Dur Magnificat BWV 243a – eine genuine Weihnachtsmusik?*, «Bach-Jahrbuch», 89 (2003), pp. 37-45), Peters concludes that «it is tempting to imagine that the Vespers service for that feast day (July 2nd, Visitation, author) in 1724 included two Magnificat settings by the Thomas cantor: the German BWV 10 as the cantata for the day and the Latin BWV 243a as the Magnificat» (p. 64). The opportunity of hearing Bach's setting of the German and of the Latin *Magnificat* in the course of the same service allows some speculation on the intentionality of the intertextual relationship between the two works. This is the point of departure of the present article, which deals with the different, albeit interrelated settings of the penultimate verse of Mary's canticle, «Suscepit Israel». For what concerns Leipzig's cultural milieu, liturgical context, Bach's style, generic conventions and related issues, the reader may refer to Glöckner's and Peters' articles and to the bibliography contained in them. Readers fluent in Italian can also take advantage of the information provided in my book. Finally, I wish to thank Margaret R. Butler and Aurelia Martelli for their careful reading of my typescript and for their willingness to share their comments.

quia fecit mihi magna, qui potens est, et sanctum nomen eius,	Denn er hat große Dinge an mir getan, der da mächtig ist und des Name heilig ist.
et misericordia eius a progenie in progenies timentibus eum.	Und seine Barmherzigkeit währet von einem Geschlecht zum andern, bei allen, die ihn fürchten.
Fecit potentiam in brachio suo, dispersit superbos mente cordis sui;	Er wirket gewaltig mit seinem Arm, und zertreuet, die hoffärtig sind in ihres Herzens Sinn.
deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles;	Er stößt die Gewaltigen vom Thron, und erhebt die Niedrigen.
esurientes implevit bonis, et divites dimisit inanes.	Die Hungrigen füllet er mit Gütern und die Reichen lässet er leer.
Suscepit Israel puerum suum, recordatus misericordiae suae,	Er denket der Barmherzigkeit und hilft seinem Diener Israel auf.
sicut locutus est ad patres nostros, Abraham et semini eius in saecula.	Wie er geredet hat zu unsern Vätern, Abraham und seinen Kindern in Ewigkeit.

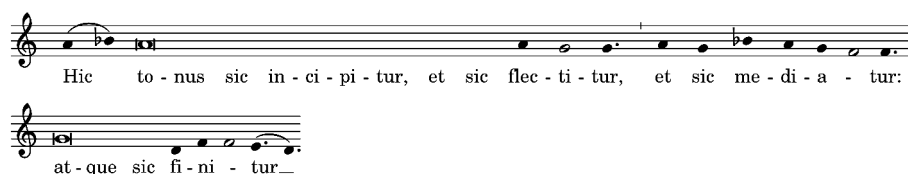
By comparing the different settings of the final portion of the canticle, the present study aims at shedding light on the stunning relationship between the E-flat *Magnificat*, the cantata BWV 10, and an episode from *The Book of Genesis* (18, 1-15).

The *Canticum* opens its final portion with a verse – «Suscepit Israel puerum suum, recordatus misericordiae suae» – thus celebrating the fulfilment of the Promise; his infinite mercy allowed God to remember his promise to Abraham: salvation through Incarnation (in Luther's words, «die Menschenwerdung des Gottessohnes»). Bach set this verse in the tenth number of his E-flat *Magnificat*, thus opting for an unprecedented combination of vocal and instrumental forces: two Sopranos, one Alto, one trumpet, and an original continuo. As in Bach's choral-cantatas, the solo trumpet is entrusted with the performance of the *cantus firmus*, corresponding to the tune proper to the German *Magnificat*. This tune, associated ever since to Luther's translation, puts both musical as well as textual distance between the Catholic and the Evangelic performance of the *Canticum*. The tune, rooted in the ninth mode, the so-called *tonus peregrinus*, opposes its changing physiognomy to the firmness of the old Gregorian tune.¹

¹ The outstanding feature of the ninth mode, which explains its exclusion from the Renaissance modal system, is the presence of two different reciting tones in the two halves of the tune. An old yet fascinating story of this mode can be read in RHABANUS ERBACHER, *Tonus Peregrinus: aus der Geschichte eines Psalmtons*, Münsterschwarzach, Vier-Türme, 1971; forty years later, another book on the same topic appeared in English: MATTIAS LUNDBERG, *Tonus Peregrinus: The History of a Psalm-tone and its Use in Polyphonic Music*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011.



Ex. 1: Gregorian-Magnificat (tune)



Ex. 2: "German"-Magnificat (tune)

There are two possible reasons that explain why in his Latin *Magnificat* Bach chose not to recur to the Gregorian tune and to employ the "German" one in no. 10, «Suscepit Israel». First of all, in textual terms, the quotation may serve as a musical trope on the word «recordatus» (God recalls his obligation to Israel, and Bach – i.e. Leipzig’s Evangelic community – did the same in recalling his debt to Luther). Secondly, in cultural terms, it may be seen as an attempt to establish a connection between the solemn performance of the Latin *Magnificat*, a “figural” setting reserved for a small number of major feasts,² and the ordinary practice of singing its German equivalent at Vespers in the artless polyphonic

² The number and the identity of the feasts on which the Latin *Magnificat* was performed at Leipzig during Bach’s lifetime are a controversial issue. According to an authoritative study (GÜNTHER STILLER, *Johann Sebastian Bach und das Leipziger gottesdienstliche Leben seiner Zeit*, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1970, p. 47) they count fifteen: Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunday, three major feasts whose service was articulated in three days and involved the performance of a “figural” *Magnificat* on the first and on the second day; the three great Marian feasts (Purification, Annunciation, Visitation); six more feasts: New Year’s Day, Epiphany, Ascension, Trinity, Nativity of St. John the Baptist (June 24th), and Apparition of St. Michael the Archangel (September 29th). The number grows further if we take into account the service of the so-called *Vorabend*, that is, the Vespers before each major feast. In contrast to this thesis, A. GLÖCKNER, *Bachs Es-Dur Magnificat BWV 243a – eine genuine Weihnachtsmusik?*, cit., p. 37 states that the “figural” *Magnificat* was only included in the services for Christmas, Easter, Whitsunday, and the three Marian Feasts. Moreover, the list of performances identified by Stiller can be implemented if we include the Sunday after New Year’s Day; see UWE WOLF, «Nach der Motette wird ferner musiciret». Zur musikalischen Ausgestaltung der Leipziger Vespersgottesdienste in der ersten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts, in *Die Quellen Johann Sebastian Bachs: Bachs Musik im Gottesdienst*. Bericht über das Symposium 4.-8. Oktober 1995 in der Internationalen Bachakademie Stuttgart, hrsg. Renate Steiger, Heidelberg, Manutius, 1998, pp. 389-399: 393.

setting provided by Samuel Schein in the *Cantional*, the *Gesangbuch Augspurgischer Confession* (1627).

S. Mei - ne See-le er-hebt den Her-ren, und mein Geist freu-et sich Got-tes, mei-nes Hei-lan-des,

A. Mei - ne See-le er-hebt den Her-ren, und mein Geist freu-et sich Got-tes, mei-nes Hei-lan-des,

T. Mei - ne See-le er-hebt den Her-ren, und mein Geist freu-et sich Got-tes, mei-nes Hei-lan-des,

B. Mei - ne See-le er-hebt den Her-ren, und mein Geist freu-et sich Got-tes, mei-nes Hei-lan-des,

Ex. 3: “German”-Magnificat – *Cantional* (1627)

The second outstanding feature of Bach’s «Suscepit Israel» is the unique assortment of a continuo entrusted to violins and violas playing *unisono*. The decision to exclude the lower register even in the sustaining part matches the composition of the vocal ensemble, formed by two Sopranos and one Alto, three voices whose lines intertwine throughout the entire performance. Enhanced by the simple pulsation of an extra-light continuo, the transparency of the musical fabric allows the *cantus firmus* to stand out, highlighting God’s recalling of his Promise.

Tr. in Mib I

S. I Su - sce - pit I - sra - el pu - e - rum su - um,

S. II Su - sce - pit I - sra - el

A. Su - sce - pit I - sra - el pu - e - rum

VI. I, II V.la

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Tr. in
Mib I

S. I

S. II

A.

VI. I, II
V.la

su - sce - pit I - sra - el, su - sce - pit I - sra - el,

pu - e - rum su - um, su - sce - pit

su - um, su - sce - pit I - sra - el, su - sce - pit

Tr. in
Mib I

S. I

S. II

A.

VI. I, II
V.la

su - sce - pit I - sra - el, su - sce - pit I - sra - el

I - sra - el, su - sce - pit I - sra - el, su - sce - pit

I - sra - el pu - e - rum su - um, su - sce - - -

Tr. in
Mib I

S. I

S. II

A.

VI. I, II
V.la

pu - e - rum su - um, su - sce - pit, su - sce - pit I - sra - el pu - e -

I - sra - el, su - sce - pit I - sra - el pu - e - rum

- - pit, su - sce - pit I - sra - el pu - e -

ALBERTO RIZZUTI

Tr. in
Mib I

S. I
- rum su - um, re - cor - da - tus mi - se - ri -

S. II
su - um, re - cor - da - tus mi -

A.
- rum su - um re - cor - da - tus mi - se - ri - cor -

Vl. I, II
V.la

Tr. in
Mib I

S. I
- cor - - - di - æ su - æ,

S. II
- se - ri - cor - - di - æ, re - cor - da - tus mi -

A.
- di - æ, re - cor -

Vl. I, II
V.la

Tr. in Mik I

S. I

S. II

A.

Vl. I, II

V.la

re - cor - da - tus mi - se - ri - cor - di - æ, mi - se - ri - cor - da - tus mi - se - ri - cor - di - æ, mi - se - ri -

Tr. in
Mi. I

S. I
su - æ, mi - se - ri - cor - di - æ su - æ.

S. II
- di - æ su - æ.

A.
- cor - di - æ su - æ.

Vl. I, II
V.la

Ex. 4: Johann Sebastian Bach, *Magnificat* in E-flat major, BWV 243a, no. 10 («Suscepit Israel»)

The sounding image artfully created by the Kantor led Josef Mertin, not surprisingly an accomplished performer as well as a scholar,³ to draw a parallel between Bach's «Suscepit Israel» and the episode of the three youths visiting Abraham in his tent:

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent during the hottest time of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing across from him. When he saw them he ran from the entrance of the tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. He said, «My lord, if I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by and leave your servant. Let a little water be brought so that you may all wash your feet and rest under the tree. And let me get a bit of food so that you may refresh yourselves since you have passed by your servant's home. After that you may be on your way». «All right», they replied, «you may do as you say». So Abraham hurried into the tent and said to Sarah, «Quick! Take three measures of fine flour, knead it, and make bread». Then Abraham ran to the herd and chose a fine, tender calf, and gave it to a servant, who quickly prepared it. Abraham then took some curds and milk, along with the calf that had been prepared, and placed the food before them. They ate while he was standing near them under a tree. Then they asked him, «Where is Sarah your wife?». He replied, «There, in the tent». One of them said, «I will surely return to you when the season comes round again, and your wife Sarah will have a son!» (Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, not far behind him. Abraham and Sarah were old and advancing in years; Sarah had long since passed menopause). So Sarah laughed to herself, thinking, «After I am worn out will I have pleasure, especially when my husband is old too?». The Lord said to Abraham, «Why did Sarah laugh and say, “Will I really have a child when I am old?” Is anything impossible for the Lord? I will return to you when the season comes round again and Sarah will have a son». Then Sarah lied, saying, «I did not laugh», because she was afraid. But the Lord said, «No! You did laugh».

³ Cf. JOSEF MERTIN, *Bachs Magnificat ad exemplum*, in Id., *Alte Musik. Wege zur Aufführungspraxis*, Wien, Lafite, 1978, pp. 137-145. Mertin's suggestion seems to have remained unnoticed by Bach scholars; while this may appear surprising, it must be pointed out that specific bibliography on Bach's *Magnificat* has not witnessed an impressive increase in the last decades.

This episode (*The Book of Genesis* 18, 1-15) depicts a recurring event in the Bible, that is to say, the announcement of an impending, yet unexpected birth (see in Lk 1, 5-23 the case of Zacharias-Elisabeth-John the Baptist) and somehow anticipates the Visitation, in whose context Mary sings the *Magnificat*; hence, the possibility to establish a connection with Bach's work.

Also pertinent to the mystery of the Incarnation is the fact that Abraham, who has experienced the presence of the Divine in his life on different occasions, sees God in flesh and blood by the oaks of Mamre. The uncertain identity of the three youths who appear to him raises a crucial question: were they the Lord and two angels, or simply three angels? Although the crux of the matter remains the Trine God, in musical terms the speculation is insightful: in the first case, Bach's choice fits the Biblical scene perfectly, with the Sopranos corresponding to the Angels, and the Alto to the Lord; in the second case, it would fit only partially, in terms of the total number of voices (three) but not of their range (that is, two plus one).

One might dismiss the association of Bach's «Suscepit Israel» with the episode at the oaks of Mamre by objecting that there is not sufficient evidence for supporting it. However, it is the composer himself who provides us with a key element in favour of such hypothesis. By setting the German version of «Suscepit Israel» in the cantata BWV 10, composed the subsequent year for the Feast of the Visitation, Bach employed Luther's translation.⁴ Similarly to the pieces of *Meine Seel erhebt den Herren* based on the literal translation of the *Canticum Mariae* (nos. 1, 5, and 7), «Er denket der Barmherzigkeit» (the equivalent of the Latin «Suscepit Israel») features the tune in *tonus peregrinus*, entrusted to a trumpet and two oboes required to play *unisono*. In this piece Bach did not venture into an intertextual play analogous to that to be found in his Latin *Magnificat*. The fifth number of his cantata BWV 10 is a Duet between Alto and Tenor, two middle voices deriving their thematic material from the melancholy sequence performed at the outset by the continuo. The repetition of this sequence in the final bars of the piece, once the instruments performing the *cantus firmus* and the voices twisting their lines have gradually crossed the threshold of silence, has the effect of rounding off «Er denket der Barmherzigkeit» with a circularity that suggests God's act of recalling.

⁴ A survey on the Biblical sources of the text of BWV 10 is provided by MARK P. BANGERT, *The Changing Fortunes of "Festum Visitationis" among Lutherans and Cantatas BWV 147 and BWV 10*, in *Die Quellen Johann Sebastian Bachs*, cit., pp. 401-416.

Following the Duet, the Cantata features its second Recitative (no. 6, see text in the box below). The piece is divided into two sections: in the first, shaped as a simple recitative, the Tenor is accompanied by the continuo; in the second, featured as an accompanied recitative, it is sustained by the upper strings, a group of instruments that suggests the brightness of the stars in the firmament, one of the metaphors for Abraham's offspring (the other being the sand spread around by the waves, «Sein Same mußte sich so sehr / Wie Sand am Meer / [...] ausbreiten»). As in all paraphrases, special attention must be devoted to the richness of the details added to the original. Translated by Luther as «Wie er geredet hat zu unsern Vätern, Abraham und seinen Kindern in Ewigkeit», in the paraphrase the Latin verse «sicut locutus est ad patres nostros, Abraham et semini eius in saecula» becomes a lengthy text asymmetrically split into 7 and 10 lines:

Was Gott den Vätern alter Zeiten
Geredet und verheißen hat,
Erfüllt er auch im Werk und in der Tat.
Was Gott dem Abraham,
Als er zu ihm in seine Hütten kam,
Versprochen und geschworen,
Ist, da die Zeit erfüllet war, geschehen.

Sein Same mußte sich so sehr
Wie Sand am Meer
Und Stern am Firmament ausbreiten,
Der Heiland ward geboren,
Das ewge Wort ließ sich im Fleische sehen,
Das menschliche Geschlecht von Tod und allem Bösen
Und von des Satans Sklaverei
Aus lauter Liebe zu erlösen;
Drum bleibt's darbei,
Daß Gottes Wort voll Gnad und Wahrheit sei.

What God of old to our forefathers
In promise and in word did give,
He hath fulfilled in all his works and deeds.
What God to Abraham,
5 When he to him into his tents did come,
Did prophesy and promise,
Is, when the time had been fulfilled, accomplished.

His seed must multiply as much
As ocean sands
10 And stars of heaven have extended;
For born was then the Savior,
Eternal word was seen in flesh appearing,
That this the human race from death and ev'ry evil
And also Satan's slavery
15 Through purest love might be delivered;
So it remains:
The word of God is full of grace and truth.

The section crucial to this study is the first. Lines 1-3 provide a fairly literal rendering of the original, enriched by a couple of redundant yet “neutral” details («Geredet und verheißen» in line 2; «im Werk und in der Tat» in line 3). Emphasized here through the adoption of italic, lines 4-7 introduce a remarkable, surprising, and to my knowledge neglected novelty: «Was Gott dem Abraham / *Als Er zu ihm in seine Hütten kam* / Versprochen und geschworen, / Ist, da die Zeit erfüllet war, geschehen».

T. Was Gott den Vä - tern al - ter Zei - ten ge - re - det und ver - heis - sen

Bc. 6 6 15

T. hat, er - füllt er auch in Werk und in der That. Was Gott dem A - bra - ham, als

Bc. 5 6 6 5 3 6

T. Er zu ihm in sei - ne Hüt - ten kam, ver - spro - chen und ge -

Bc. 7 5 6

T. - schwo - ren, ist, da die Zeit er - fül - let war, ge - sche - hen.

Bc. 7 5 6 7 #

Ex. 5: Johann Sebastian Bach, *Meine Seel erhebt den Herren*, cantata BWV 10, no. 6 («Was Gott den Vätern alter Zeiten»), mm. 1-10

Bach and his anonymous collaborator (Bach himself, one is tempted to assume) could have easily chosen another occasion among those in which God spoke to Abraham. Why then, in writing and setting a line such as «Als Er zu ihm in seine Hütten kam» («When he to him into his tents did come»), did (t)he(y) choose the apparition of the trio of strange youths by the oaks of Mamre? Why, once the verbal text had been completed, did Bach decide to set its initial portion in simple recitative, thus giving words the maximum of evidence? And why, finally, did he decide to stress the word «Hütten» («tents») setting its initial syllable on the first altered note of the piece, and harmonizing it by means of a sudden diminished-seventh chord?

A possible clue to unveil the metaphysical sounding image of Bach's «Suscepit Israel» lies outside his Latin *Magnificat*. Where? In the paraphrase of the next verse, set to music twelve months later in a cantata – *Meine Seel erhebt den Herren* – meant to enrich

Leipzig's services for the Feast of the Visitation; a cantata featuring an imaginative rendering of a text deeply treasured by Luther and by Lutherans: the German *Magnificat*.

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