

‘*Aus eigener Erfahrung redet*’: Bach, Luther, and Mary’s Voice in the *Magnificat*, BWV 243*

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In the Cantata 106, *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit* (Actus Tragicus), Bach takes the believer on a spiritual journey from a sober meditation on the inevitability of death to the promise of eternal life and redemption.¹ The pivotal moment occurs in the central movement (BWV 106/2d) after the bass soloist, with a gleefully ominous triple-metred aria, has reminded the faithful to put their houses in order. The lower three voices participate in a G-minor fugue marked by a chromatic ascent (either half-step or minor third) and jagged descending diminished seventh, mournfully intoning the sombre text from Ecclesiastes: “Es ist die alte Bund”; Mensch, “du musst sterben”. The gloom is broken by the soprano who, with a free and florid style, enters like a beam of light (Ex. 1). With the words from the Revelation of St John (22:20), ‘Ja, komm, Herr Jesu, komm!’, the soprano’s diatonic melodic line confidently ascends into the upper register, briefly veering towards B-flat major, becoming increasingly resolute as the passage continues, while the chorale, ‘Ich hab mein Sach’ Gott heimgestellt’, played by the recorders (not shown in example), succeeds in negotiating between these two seemingly contradictory musical and theological expressions. The lower voices persist in their dire fugal pronouncements, but Bach allows the confident soprano the final word, one that even silences the continuo; the passage concludes with an ornamented cadential passage in semiquaver triplets that arrives with tentative optimism and a distinct lack of completion on the G-major

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¹ For a compelling reading of BWV 106, see Eric Chafe, *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 91–124.

sonority (Ex. 2). Time and tonal movement are briefly suspended until gravity takes over for the flatward descent to D minor for the subsequent movement.²

145 Soprano *Solo*
 Alto Ja, ja, ja, komm, Herr Je-su, komm, ja, komm, Herr Je-su, komm, ja, komm, Herr Je - su, ja, ja,
 Tenor ster - ben!
 Bass - - ben!
 Continuo ster - ben!

Example 1: Cantata 106: Entrance of soprano in fugal complex, BWV 106/2d, bb.145-149

181 Flutes I/II
 Viola da gamba I
 Viola da gamba II
 Soprano *pp*
 Alto Ja komm, Herr Je - su, Herr Je - su!
 Tenor ster - ben!
 Bass - - ben!
 Continuo - - ben!

Example 2: Cantata 106: Florid soprano conclusion of BWV 106/2d, bb. 181-185

² Eric Chafe has called attention to the theological significance of this lack of completion, noting as well ways in which the rhythmic freedom of the soprano line, with the triplets and mordents, give a sense of 'suspended time' (ibid, 106). In this example I have followed the version in the *NBA*, in which the cantata begins and ends in F major rather than E flat, as it did in the *BGA* and earlier editions. This discrepancy is a result of the fact that Bach had placed the recorders in F major (since they were tuned in *Kammerton*), while the remainder of the parts, tuned in *Chorton*, appear in E flat. Chafe's discussion is based on the assumption that the cantata is in E flat; though the F major version does not journey so far flatward, his points about tonal allegory are no less valid. The interpretation of the soprano part here (or any other part of the cantata for that matter) is contingent upon the fact that there is no surviving autograph of BWV 106; thus the version that has come down to us is based on copies that date from the second half of the eighteenth century by as yet unidentified copyists, and may not represent Bach's initial version. For a description of the sources, see *NBA KB I/34*, 11-14.

This remarkable cantata, written so early in Bach's career, is in some respects an unlikely place to begin a consideration of expressions of the feminine in Bach's music. The text, with its mixture of chorales and verses from the Old and New Testament, is entirely gender neutral: there are no specific references to men or women, nor does Bach invoke the gendered affects associated with secular love duets so familiar from Italian opera, and which Bach borrowed for the amorous exchanges between Jesus and the Soul in works such as Cantatas 49 and 140.

Yet there is something striking about the treatment of the soprano voice at this critical moment in the cantata that seems to suggest the feminine. The passage is marked by any number of antitheses—high and low, chromatic and diatonic, rhythmic rigidity and flexibility, syllabic and florid text setting—inducing the affective contrast between stern resignation of the lower voices and burning desire expressed by the soprano. But might Bach be heard to invoke comparable notions about gender difference here? Without knowledge of Bach's choirs and performance practices, a modern listener in the concert hall today might well be forgiven for mapping notions about masculine and feminine onto this passage, particularly if a female soprano were singing. But what about Bach's listeners? Or to pose the question more broadly: to what extent might we think about the feminine and masculine in Bach's sacred music, regardless of the fact that his sacred works were sung by boys and men?³

This essay is a preliminary consideration of Bach's expressions of femininity in his music through a study of a liturgical work that is sung exclusively from a woman's perspective: the *Magnificat* in D major (BWV 243), Bach's Latin setting of the canticle of Mary from the Gospel of St Luke 1:46–55. My examination of this sublime work is informed by a document that Bach certainly knew and that scholars have yet to consider thoroughly in the context of BWV 243, Martin Luther's Commentary on *Magnificat*, written and printed in 1521, and widely disseminated.⁴ In a classic essay on *Magnificat* published in 1929, Charles Stanford

³ John Butt (*Bach's Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) raises a number of issues of relevance here concerning the tension between the modern and pre-modern listener; see particularly pp. 15–25. Butt's deliberate use of the female pronoun in his descriptions of the certain passages in the Passions is thoughtful and unapologetic, although notably he includes the disclaimers that underscore the difference between Bach's performance practice and notions of subjectivity that are inherently gendered, a point that is central to the argument of this essay. See, for instance, his discussion (p. 87) of the alto aria 'Ach, nun ist mein Jesu hin' that opens Part II of the St Matthew Passion (BWV 244/30): 'The agony of separation from Jesus, undergone by a feminine subject representing the faithful (and thus the church of the bride of Christ), momentarily separates her from the progress of the music, the instruments seemingly treading water on the dominant chord for four bars (bb. 13–16), waiting for her to align herself to the ritornello material (all Bach's singers were male, of course, but the Bride/Bridegroom imagery essentially puts all humans constituting the church in the "feminine" position).'

⁴ *Das Magnificat vorteuſchet und außgelegt durch D. Martinum Luther Augusti* [Wittemberg etc., 1521]. On the history of the writing and printing of the Commentary, see the 'Introduction to Volume 21', *Luther's Works: The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), xvii–xviii. The English translations provided here are based on the chapter entitled 'The Magnificat' by A. T. W. Steinhäuser included in that edition. Reference here is also made to the German version published in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1897),

Terry touchingly refers to instances in which ‘the voice of the Madonna’ is heard.⁵ Luther’s Commentary on the canticle, with its emphasis on the special nature of Mary’s singing voice, not only lends credence to Terry’s somewhat quaint analysis, but also supports the notion that Bach, like Luther, understood the *Magnificat* as emanating directly from the voice of the Virgin. Taking into account Luther’s Commentary and the views about Mary that were prevalent in the Lutheran church, this essay explores the ways in which Bach’s setting of the *Magnificat* might be heard to capture those features of Mary that are so prominent in Luther’s discussion—her femininity, humility and humanity—and in so doing provides us with important clues to understanding how Bach expressed the feminine in his music.

***Magnificat* and the Feast of the Visitation**

The *Magnificat*, which appears in the Gospel of St Luke 1:46–55, is the culmination of a remarkably intimate encounter between two women on the cusp of motherhood. Mary, pregnant with Jesus, visits her older cousin Elizabeth, who, upon seeing Mary, realises that she too is pregnant; she will give birth to the son who will grow up to be St John the Baptist.⁶ Indeed, even in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, this moment was often depicted in remarkably human terms, as is apparent in this fifteenth-century painting of *The Visitation* by Rogier van der

vol. 7, 538–604 (henceforth *WA*), readily available online at www.lutherdansk.dk/WA/D.%20Martin%20Luthers%20Werke,%20Weimarer%20Ausgabe%20-%20WA.htm. Several scholars have made productive use of the Commentary on the *Magnificat* to argue specific points about Bach’s setting of the canticle. Michael Linton (‘Bach, Luther, and the Magnificat’, *Bach*, 17/2, April 1986, 3–15) argues that not only would Bach have known the Commentary (despite the apparent lack of firm evidence) but that ‘major passages of the work are structured in accordance with his exegesis of the Canticle’ (p. 5). He focuses on Bach’s use of Luther’s metaphors, some formal decisions that he believes correspond to elements of the Commentary, and the ways in which Bach musically emphasises words that Luther hand singled out for discussion. Linton also sees Luther’s influence in Bach’s placement of the ‘Virga Jesse Floruit’ between the ‘Esurientes’ and ‘Suscepit Israel’. On the relationship between the two versions of *Magnificat* BWV 243 and 243a and the apparent primacy of the version without the four *laudes*, see Robert Marshall, ‘On the Origin of the *Magnificat*: A Lutheran Composer’s Challenge’, in *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach: The Sources, the Style, the Significance* (New York: Schirmer, 1989), 161–173, originally printed in *Bach Studies*, ed. Don Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 3–17; more recently, Andreas Glöckner, ‘Bachs Es-Dur-Magnificat BWV 243a: eine genuine Weihnachtsmusik?’, *Bach-Jahrbuch*, 89 (2003), 37–45. For a thoughtful consideration of Luther’s Commentary in relation specifically to the third movement that touches on some issues considered here, see Robert Cammarota, ‘On the Performance of “Quia respexit...omnes generationes” from J. S. Bach’s *Magnificat*’, *Journal of Musicology*, 18/3 (Summer 2001), 458–89.

⁵ Charles Sanford Terry, ‘The “Magnificat”’, in *Bach: The Magnificat, Lutheran Masses and Motets* (London: Humphrey Milford; Oxford University Press, 1929), 5–25, here at 14.

⁶ Luther describes this in his Sermon on the Feast of the Visitation, 2 July 1523. See Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner (eds. and trans.), *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 41: ‘Elizabeth did not yet know that she was pregnant, but when Mary came to her, she realised that she was carrying a child. This is one miracle and it is a major one; but it is still more astounding that she realised Christ lay in the body of Virgin. She could not see this in her body, for Mary was only a few days pregnant, but still she recognised this.’

Weyden, now housed at the Museum der bildenen Künste in Leipzig ([Figure 1](#)). The two women touch each other's wombs; at the sound of Mary's voice, the elder Elizabeth feels the movement of the baby and praises her cousin's faith; Mary responds by singing the passage that begins with the line 'Magnificat anima mea Dominum' – my soul extols the Lord.⁷

The canticle of the Virgin borrows heavily from the Old Testament, in particular the song of Hannah rejoicing over the birth of Samuel (Samuel 2:1–10), and in both content and structure is also much indebted to the Hebrew Psalms. It became part of the Vespers service quite early in the history of the church, probably before the specifically Christian liturgy had distinguished itself from Jewish traditions.⁸

Despite the change in attitude towards Mary and the saints that was so central to the Reformation, both Anglicans and Lutherans kept the *Magnificat* in their liturgy. Luther's references to singing the *Magnificat* as a boy in the Latin School at Eisenach may well attest to an early attachment to the canticle that would later find expression in his Commentary ('If the flesh did not hamper us and we were true Christians, we could sing nothing throughout our entire life but the *Magnificat*, the *Confitemini*, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the *Sanctus...*').⁹ In his *Deutsche Messe und Ordnung Gottis diensts* (Wittenberg, 1526), Luther prescribes the singing of the *Magnificat* at Vespers after the reading of the Old Testament. And while the use of Latin in the liturgy in Leipzig diminished somewhat in the eighteenth century, the Latin *Magnificat* continued to be sung for Vespers well into the eighteenth century on the occasion of the major feasts.¹⁰ It was particularly suitable for *Visitae Mariae* or Feast of the Visitation, which continued to be celebrated along with the other Marian feasts in Leipzig (and many other Lutheran communities).¹¹ As Mattias Lundberg points out, the canticle took on a special significance for that Feast: the Gospel reading for the Feast of the Visitation allowed listeners to hear the *Magnificat* in the context of a complete account of Mary's meeting with Elizabeth; depending upon what day of the week the feast fell in a given year, the story might be heard multiple times in a single day.¹² Moreover, since the recitations of the *Magnificat* in the vernacular were distinguished by the use of

⁷ There is a tradition, much discussed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whereby the canticle was assigned to Elizabeth rather than Mary. See Stephen Benko, 'The Magnificat: A History of the Controversy', *Journal of the Biblical Literature*, 86/3 (1967), 263–275.

⁸ Paul Bemile, *The Magnificat within the Context and Framework of Lukan Theology: An Exegetical Theological Study of Lk: 1:46–55*, Regensburger Studien zur Theologie, 34 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1986), 36.

⁹ Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 23.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Deutsche Messe und ordnung Gottis diensts* (Wittenburg, 1526), B ii. See also Robert Cammarota, 'The Repertoire of Magnificats in Leipzig at the time of J. S. Bach: A Study of the Manuscript Sources', PhD Dissertation, New York University, 1986, 30; Stephen Rose, 'Introduction' to *Leipzig Church Music from the Sherard Collection: Eight Works by Sebastian Knüpfer, Johann Schelle, and Johann Kuhnau*, ed. Stephen Rose (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 2014); Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music*, 290.

¹¹ Mattias Lundberg, 'J. S. Bach's *Meine Seele erhebt den Herrn* (BWV 10) in the Context of other uses of the Magnificat Text for the Feast of the Visitation', *Understanding Bach*, 8 (2013), 9–31.

¹² Lundberg, 'J. S. Bach's *Meine Seele*', 13.



Figure 1: Rogier (Roger) van der Weyden, *Visitation*, c.1435–40. Oil and tempera on wood, 57.5 x 36.2 cm. Museum der Bildenen Künste (Leipzig) / Ursula Gerstenberger / Art Resource, NY

the distinctive *tonus peregrinus* that set 'the canticle apart from items of lesser liturgical and theological importance', the repetitions of the canticle may have been linked together in the minds of worshippers by virtue of their special sound.¹³ The *Visitae Mariae* was the occasion for which Bach composed his German setting of the *Magnificat*, *Meine Seel erhebt den Herren* (BWV 10) and Cantata 147, and was also the liturgical occasion – as we now know – for performances of both surviving versions of Bach's Latin *Magnificat*, BWV 243a and BWV 243.¹⁴

Transforming Mary

Given Luther's rejection of Medieval Mariology, we might wonder to what extent Marian feasts or the ubiquity of the *Magnificat* in the Lutheran liturgy actually invoked notions about Mary herself. In his study of Lutheran liturgy in Leipzig during the time of Bach, Günther Stiller maintains that Marian festivals in Leipzig were celebrated as festivals of Christ from the time of the Reformation.¹⁵ This comment, however, reflects a marked tendency noted by a number of scholars to discount the Mariological elements in the liturgy after the Reformation, and in so doing ignore the potential power of Mary's distinctly female voice in the canticle for Lutheran worshippers. With the rejection of the role of Mary and the saints as intercessors in prayer and the emphasis on the absolute authority of the Scripture, Protestants – to varying degrees – either pushed Mary aside or allowed her to recede into the background; nonetheless, attitudes differed not only from one to another commentator, but also within a single theologian's oeuvre. This is certainly the case with Luther, who may have rejected the iconoclasm of the most radical reformers, but also condemned Medieval Mariology as slander.¹⁶ In his

¹³ See Mattias Lundberg, *Tonus Peregrinus: The History of a Psalm-Tone and its Use in Polyphonic Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 145.

¹⁴ See note 4, esp. Glöckner, 'Bachs Es-Dur Magnificat', 40–41.

¹⁵ Günther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bourman, Daniel F. Poellot and Hilton C. Oswald, ed. Robin A. Leaver (St Louis: Concordia, 1984), 56.

¹⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 154. There is an extensive literature on Lutheran attitudes towards Mary. One of the most thorough examinations of the topic from a Catholic perspective is William J. Cole 'Was Luther a Marian Devotee?', *Marian Studies*, 21 (1970), 94–202, who concludes that the question is in some respects unanswerable, and that a better approach is to describe his attitudes. 'This said, I would submit that it is beyond all reasonable doubt that Luther loved and venerated (honoured and praised) Mary personally and imitated the evangelical virtues she saw displayed in her life' (p. 201). Walter Tappolet (ed.), *Das Marienlob der Reformatoren: Martin Luther, Johannes Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger* (Tübingen: Katzmann, 1962), 17–162, organises Luther's writings about by topic, and includes several sections of relevance here. Of note is the fact that the section on the *Magnificat* Commentary is entitled 'Lob der Sängerin' (pp. 78–88); see also Christopher Burger, *Tradition und Neubeginn: Martin Luther in seinen frühen Jahren, Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation: Studies in the Late Middle Ages, Humanism, and Reformation*, 79 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014) and *Marias Lied in Luthers Deutung: der Kommentar zum Magnifikat (Lk 1, 46b–55) aus den Jahren 1520/21* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Bridget Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant Catholic Piety, 1500–1648* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Beth Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary: Changing Images of the Virgin Mary in the Lutheran Sermons of the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Hilda Graef, *Mary: A*

classic study of the Virgin Mary, Jaroslav Pelikan notes how ‘many interpretations of the Reformation both friendly and hostile’ have ‘emphasised the negative and polemical aspects of Mariology at the expense of the positive place that Protestant reformers assigned to Mary in their theology’.¹⁷ In her study of Marian motets in the Lutheran church, Mary Frandsen comments on ‘the erroneous assumption that everything associated with Mary and the saints simply vanished from the Lutheran landscape’. While some texts have been ‘de-Marianised’ and others are revised so as to remove references to her role as an intercessor, Frandsen nonetheless maintains that there are a ‘significant number of chants and motets addressed solely to Mary’.¹⁸

A consideration of the attitudes of modern theologians reveals a picture that is no less contradictory, for it has been possible for commentators from Catholic and Protestant perspectives to find evidence of both Luther’s devotion to Mary (in support of their ecumenical efforts) and his relative hostility towards her. Hilda Graef picks up on this ambivalence when she compares Luther to Calvin, noting that ‘Luther was the less logical of the two Reformers; he would still admit that Mary could pray for us just as we can pray for each other; whereas Calvin would not allow even this’.¹⁹

A number of recent studies have shown that during the Reformation Mary was not so much suppressed as transformed.²⁰ Bridget Heal’s examination of the cult of the Virgin in early modern Germany emphasises the continued reverence towards Mary among reformers, and the ubiquity of images of the Virgin, even in many German Protestant strongholds:

...the Reformation rarely created, as has been supposed, an exclusively masculine religious landscape. Mary was still present. She was no longer invoked as a powerful intercessor, but was instead confined to the characteristically female role of housemother.²¹

At stake in the various controversies about Mary that arose between Catholics and Protestants and among Protestants themselves was the nature of Mary’s divinity or lack thereof. Once the Protestants stripped away the divine nature of Mary—becoming ‘demystified’ and losing her ‘supernatural power’, as Heal describes—she also relinquished the strength in the Catholic realm that had permitted her to transcend prevailing notions about the weakness of the female sex.²² Luther may have accepted some of the extraordinary claims about Mary—that she retained her virginity after conceiving Jesus and gave birth to Him without labour and pain; yet, in rejecting her role as intercessor or protector, what

History of Doctrine and Devotion, volume 2: From the Reformation to the Present Day (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 6–12.

¹⁷ Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries*, 157.

¹⁸ Mary Frandsen, ‘“Salve Regina/Salve Rex Christe”: Lutheran Engagement with the Marian Antiphons in the Age of Orthodoxy and Piety’, *Musica Disciplina*, 55 (2010), 129–218, here at 132.

¹⁹ Graef, *Mary*, 7.

²⁰ Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 282.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 284.

remained was an image of a woman whose 'domestic role was no longer offset by authority in the heavenly sphere'.²³ This gave Mary a new kind of accessibility and utility, for in relinquishing the divine powers she acquired the ability to exemplify a host of virtues, in particular humility (for men and women) and chastity (for women), and also validated female domesticity and the important roles women could play as mothers and companions.²⁴

The transformation of Mary's role was also apparent in the production and reception of the many art works in which she was depicted. Bonnie Noble's study of the Madonna panels painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder points out the extent to which Luther allowed for images of the Virgin, as long as they were used to stimulate memory rather than for worship.²⁵ 'Shouldn't it be allowed to us, without it being a sin to have a crucifix or picture of Mary', Luther wonders, 'since the Jews and Christ himself were allowed to have a picture of the pagans and the dead emperor, both of which were links to the devil?'²⁶ According to Noble, this is precisely the context in which Lutherans would have appreciated the more than fifty Madonna panels produced by Cranach and his studio after 1525.²⁷ Although Cranach had maintained close relationships both with Luther and Luther's sometime adversary, the Catholic cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg, the Marian images produced later in his career, Noble proposes, were not necessarily fashioned for Catholics (although many of them may have found their way into Catholic hands), nor can we necessarily assume that his pictures expressed Cranach's own theological perspectives. However, Cranach's response

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 284–90. The question of whether Mary's status among both Catholics and Protestants was essentially positive or negative for women has inspired considerable discussion among scholars writing from a feminist perspective. Did the cult of the Virgin, which placed Mary as an 'unattainable ideal of female virtue', impose misogynist values or did the worship of Mary (and the female saints) provide women with figures with whom they might identify? Similarly, scholars have speculated about the consequences of her changed status in the Reformation, and the extent to which the demoting of Mary either helped or hurt the status of women. As Heal suggests (pp. 262–3), however, it is all but impossible to draw any firm conclusions, given the multi-valence of Mary as a symbol, the differing ways in which she might have been regarded in any given time or place, and the fact that the cult of Mary was of paramount importance for male worshippers as well. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); for a consideration of some of the negative effects of Luther's emphasis on domesticity and marriage, see Mary E. Wiesner, 'Luther and Women: The Death of Two Marys', in Jim Obelkevich, Lyndal Roper and Raphael Samuel (eds.), *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 295–308.

²⁵ 'Even the iconoclasts must allow me a Crucifix or a Madonna image, or even an idol, even under the strictest law of Moses, provided I carry it or look at it, as long as I don't worship it, but only keep it in my memory.' Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (WA, vol. 18, p. 70, lines 33–36), translated and cited by Bonnie Noble, *Lucas Cranach the Elder: Art and Devotion of the German Reformation* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 163. See also Tappolet, *Das Marienlob der Reformatoren*, 146–7.

²⁶ Tappolet, *Das Marienlob der Reformatoren*, 146: 'Sollte es uns nicht ebenso ohne Sünde sein, ein Kruzifix oder Marienbild zu haben, als es den Juden und Christo selbst (erlaubt) war, das Heiden und toten Kaisers, eines Glieds des Teufels, Bild zu haben?'

²⁷ Noble, *Lucas Cranach the Elder*, 165.

to Lutheran reforms was apparent, she argues, in his decision to paint only Madonnas rather than images depicting Mariological legends, omitting the halos or rich backgrounds that would suggest her divinity.²⁸ Cranach's painting of the Virgin and Child with Saint John and the Angels from 1536 (Museo Nacional del Prado) is typical; Mary is pictured in a half-length frontal pose, simply attired, with the Christ child on her lap, handing him a bunch of grapes (invoking the Eucharist); Elizabeth's child John reaches for the grapes, the three protagonists guarded by baby angels ([Figure 2](#)).

What is most relevant here, however, is the relative flexibility of the ways in which these images of Mary could be interpreted; Cranach, in response to Reformation ideologies, may have altered his way of representing the Virgin Mary, but the theological implications of the portraits and their use as devotional objects were always in flux, depending upon whether the viewers approached them with Catholic or Lutheran sympathies.²⁹ Mary may no longer have been venerated, but her special nature, as Luther and many subsequent Lutheran preachers emphasised, nonetheless merited commemoration. We see the same kind of circulation with Latin liturgical music, including settings of the *Magnificat*, which were used by worshippers of both faiths.³⁰

The Marian Feasts that were celebrated in the Lutheran Church could also be repurposed to suit new theological contexts. Indeed, Martin Luther and many subsequent Lutheran preachers used the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth for moral instruction, as has been shown by Beth Kreitzer.

Mary's faith and example of humble service were to be followed by everyone as true Christian virtue. However, as often as Mary was presented as a model for all Christians, she was elevated as a shining beacon of proper feminine behaviour, both for women and for unmarried girls. Even her more general virtues could teach something especially to the female audience. The 'school' of Mary was open for business.³¹

Lutheran theologians were particularly interested in Mary's demonstration of faith and its expression in good works; this was exemplified by her desire to visit Elizabeth and remain with her in her pregnancy, which showed the importance of helping one's neighbours, of social propriety, and the virtue of finding happiness in the domestic sphere.³² The fact that this charitable deed was accomplished chastely—that Mary travelled directly to Elizabeth's home, protecting her reputation without any frivolity or impropriety—was also of significance to some preachers.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 170.

³⁰ See, for instance, the list of thirty-two *Magnificat* settings by foreign composers performed by J. P. Krieger in Weißenfels in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries discussed by Cammarota, 'The Repertoire of Magnificats in Leipzig', 90–92.

³¹ Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 48.

³² Ibid., 56–67.



Figure 2: Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), *The Virgin and Child, with Saint John and Angels*, 1536. Oil on panel 1.213 x 0.834 m. Museo del Prado / Copyright of the image of the Museo Nacional del Prado / Art Resource, NY

Lutheran commentators even viewed the actual singing of the *Magnificat* as a demonstration of Mary's virtue. One sermon discussed by Kreitzer underscores the fact that the canticle was not a 'shameful wanton love song', but was chaste and pure and—unlike so much female speech—brief and to the point.³³ Another sermon refers to Mary's song as a 'beautiful sermon, in which the Virgin Mary teaches us how we might come to God's grace'.³⁴ But Mary's value was less as a preacher than in her behaviour, for she showed 'how we should respond to God in the face of his gifts, praising him and avoiding all semblance of pride'.³⁵ Embedded in this formulation is a contradiction; for while the *Magnificat* provides the most vivid example of Mary in the role of preacher and teacher, her significance as a model for women is in her humility and chastity rather than in her eloquence. Indeed, the need to reconcile these seemingly incongruous elements—humility and eloquence—caused no end of difficulties for commentators, as Kreitzer describes:

The dilemma facing Lutheran preachers is how to preserve the paradoxical aspects of Mary's image, while remaining true to the scriptural texts; she is to be highly honoured, and yet she is humble and of low estate; she is the Mother of God, the blessed *Theotokos*, and yet must be rescued from sin and death like the rest of us. Luther, as fond as he is of paradoxes, has difficulty maintaining this one...³⁶

Mary as singer: Luther's Commentary on the *Magnificat*

In formulating their views about Mary in general and the *Magnificat* in particular, Lutheran preachers undoubtedly derived much of their inspiration from Luther's Commentary on the *Magnificat*. Dedicated to the young Prince John Frederick, Duke of Saxony, the Commentary, as Luther explains in the introduction, was intended to demonstrate how Mary's words—out of all Scripture—provided the best lesson for a young ruler in how to practise humility and rule with the welfare of his citizens at heart. Although Luther wrote the Commentary relatively early in his career and his views on some matters would evolve, he regarded the Commentary as sufficiently relevant to refer his readers to it in his later sermons on the Visitation.³⁷ While Luther's Commentary raises a number of issues that have been discussed at length in the scholarly literature, several central points are particularly relevant to our consideration of Mariology in Bach's time and his

³³ Christoph Vischer, *Aufliegung der Evangelien* (Schmalkalden: Michael Schmuck, 1570), cited and translated by Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 58.

³⁴ Veit Dietrich, *Kinderpredig von fürnembsten Festen durch das gantze Jar* (Nuremberg: Johann Berg und Ulrich Neuber, 1546), cited and translated by Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 59.

³⁵ Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 59.

³⁶ Kreitzer, *Reforming Mary*, 64.

³⁷ Joel R. Baseley (trans.), *Festival Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils: Sermons for the Main Festivals and Saints; Days of the Church Year; Winter and Summer Selections* (Dearborn, MI: Mark V Publications, 2005). Luther concludes his Second Sermon on the Feast of Mary's Visitation of Elizabeth with the following: 'But the Magnificat is explained clearly enough verse by verse in the special booklet that you already have.' (p. 117)

setting of the *Magnificat*. Of particular importance is the apparent contradiction between Mary's low estate, her inherent insignificance, and her worthiness born of the fact that God bestowed upon her such grace.³⁸ Luther is not unaware of the paradox, for in fact Mary's greatness is in her recognition of her lack of merit, her acknowledgement that God chose her not because of her own intrinsic worth, but out of His own pure goodness and grace. We see here as well the 'housemother' theme cited above: '[to] her neighbours and their daughters', Luther tells us, 'she was but a simple maiden, tending the cattle and doing the housework, and doubtless esteemed no more than any poor maidservant today, who does as she is told around the house'.³⁹ God might have chosen one of the rich daughters of the chief priests and counsellors, but instead singled out this ordinary girl, a descendent of David to be sure, of the stem of Jesse, but one that had long since withered to the point where it seemed unlikely to bear fruit.⁴⁰

Her lowly estate, however, in no way discounts the value of her unique perspective, for at the core of Luther's praise of the *Magnificat* is the fact that the prayer is self-revelatory, and it is Mary's unique perspective that is of value: 'In order properly to understand this sacred hymn of praise', he writes in the opening sentence of the Commentary, 'we need to bear in mind that the Blessed Virgin Mary is speaking on the basis of her own experience (*aus eigener Erfahrung redet*) in which she was enlightened and instructed by the Holy Spirit'.⁴¹ In some respects, this is a curious statement—after all, isn't this merely a hymn of praise? But Luther explains that Mary's wisdom, imparted by the Holy Spirit, comes directly from her lowliness, poverty, inferiority, all of which were essential to the creation of the canticle. Had Mary not been of such low estate, not been so humbled and receptive to God's grace, had she not experienced in her own being (*in ihr selbst erfahren*) the great things that God worked within her, then she would not have been able to acquire such deep wisdom.⁴² Her perspective matters, for '[t]he tender Mother of Christ...teaches us with her words, and by the example of her experience how to know, love, and praise God'.⁴³

But Luther values not only her experience, but also her voice, a point that musicologists and theologians have overlooked. As Luther emphasises in his dedication to Prince John and throughout the Commentary, Mary imparts her lesson not through speech but through song.

Now in all Scripture I do not know anything that serves such a purpose so well as this sacred hymn by the most blessed Mother of God, which ought indeed to be learned and kept in mind by all who would rule well and be

³⁸ He reiterates this point later in the Second Sermon: 'She glorifies God and sings Him the *Magnificat*. The song goes on to acknowledge her human neediness and nothingness only to elevate the Lord, and additionally, the extent of all his divine favours. By doing this she acknowledges that she is nothing and he is everything. She holds on to nothing as from herself, but everything from God.' *Festival Sermons of Martin Luther*, 117.

³⁹ Luther, 'The *Magnificat*', 301; WA, 7:549, 4-7.

⁴⁰ Luther, 'The *Magnificat*', 301-2; WA, 7:549, 8-30.

⁴¹ Luther, 'The *Magnificat*', 299; WA, 7:546, 21-24.

⁴² Luther, 'The *Magnificat*', 299; WA, 7:546, 29.

⁴³ Luther, 'The *Magnificat*', 301; WA, 7:548, 29-31.

helpful lords. In it she really *sings* sweetly about the fear of God, what sort of Lord He is, and especially what his dealings are with those of low and high degree. Let someone else listen to his love singing a secular song [*weltlich lied*]; this pure virgin well deserves to be heard by a prince and lord, as she *sings* him her sacred, chaste, and salutary *song*. It is a fine custom, too, that this canticle is sung in all the churches daily at vespers, and in a special and appropriate setting that sets it apart from all the other chants.

May the tender Mother of God herself procure for me the spirit of wisdom profitably and thoroughly to expound this song of hers, so that your Grace as well as we all may draw from it wholesome knowledge a praiseworthy life, and thus come to chant and sing this Magnificat eternally in heaven.⁴⁴

The inference is that one understands Mary's words through music – both from listening to the sweet sound of her voice and through singing the canticle. In fact, throughout the Commentary, Luther makes numerous references both to song and to Mary's singing. We find it first in his discussion of her use of the word 'magnificat' in Luke 1:46:

Just as a book title indicates what are the contents of the book, so this word 'magnifies' is used by Mary to indicate what her hymn of praise is to be about, namely, the great works and deeds of God, for the strengthening of our faith, for the comforting of all those of low degree, and for the terrifying of all the mighty ones of earth. We are to let the hymn serve this threefold purpose; for she *sang* it not for herself alone but for us all, to *sing* it after her.⁴⁵

Here Luther underscores the fact that Mary's singing is by no means a solitary or private act but something to be heard and emulated by worshippers today. Again Mary's modest devotion is at the core, for she does not claim that it is her own voice that magnifies the Lord, but rather her soul, an action that appears all but inevitable for one so filled with God's grace. When we feel the greatness of God and his works (as apparently did Mary), 'words and thoughts fail us' but 'the soul must be set into motion' in such a way that 'all that lived within us wanted to break forth into praise and singing'.⁴⁶

This apparently is no easy feat, for Luther refers as well to the 'false spirits who cannot sing the Magnificat aright', for those who are 'unwilling to suffer oppression and to be in the depths' can never properly love or praise God, thus the *Magnificat* itself languishes.⁴⁷ It is only by following Mary's example and remaining faithful at all times, regardless of whether God gives or takes, that allows us to 'sing a right Magnificat'.⁴⁸ This point is reiterated in his comments on Luke 1:47 ('And my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour'):

⁴⁴ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 298; WA, 7:545, 17–31. Emphasis added. On the notion that Luther's mention of the 'special and appropriate settings' in the letter to the Duke of Saxony refers the *tonus peregrinus*, see Lundberg, *Tonus peregrinus*, 144–45.

⁴⁵ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 306; WA, 7:554, 14–23. Emphasis added here and below.

⁴⁶ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 307; WA, 7:554, 25–9.

⁴⁷ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 307; WA, 7:554, 30f.

⁴⁸ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 309; WA, 7:556, 10.

So the wondrous pure spirit of Mary is worthy even of greater praise, because, having such overwhelming honours heaped upon her head, she does not let them tempt her, but acts as though she did not see it, remains 'even and right in the way', clings only to God's goodness, which she neither sees nor feels, overlooks the good things she does feel, and neither takes pleasure nor seeks her own enjoyment in it. Thus she truly can *sing*, 'My spirit rejoices in God, my saviour'.⁴⁹

Throughout the Commentary, Luther in fact reiterates the notion that Mary is not merely a composer of the hymn or author of these words inspired by her soul; their value resides in no small part in her performance, to which he repeatedly refers. We see this, for instance, in his discussion of Luke 1:48 ('For He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed'). Considering that this is the only verse in the canticle in which Mary refers to herself, it is notable that it inspires Luther's lengthy discussion on the difference between 'humility' and 'low estate'.⁵⁰ He then reminds us of Mary's participation:

Mary begins with herself and *sings* what He has done for her. Thus she teaches us a twofold lesson. First, every one of us should pay attention to what God does for him rather than to all the works He does for others.⁵¹

And he reiterates this point in the first sentence of his discussion of 1:49 ('For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is name'):

Here she *sings* in one breath of all the works that God has done for her, and observes the proper order. In the preceding verse she *sang* of God's regard and gracious good will toward her, which is indeed the greatest and chief work of grace, as we have said. Now she comes to the works and gifts.⁵²

The notion of 'one breath' here is particularly intriguing, for implicit in this is a kind of expansiveness, an allusion to the physicality of singing, and perhaps even a special power he accords to Mary's musicality, even as he denies her divinity.⁵³ And singing once again comes into play in the Commentary on Luke 1:50 ('And his mercy is on those who fear Him, from generation to generation'):

⁴⁹ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 311; WA, 7:558, 18-25. Emphasis added here and below.

⁵⁰ Cammerota, 'On the Performance of "Quia respexit..."', 470-71.

⁵¹ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 318; WA, 7:565, 1-3.

⁵² Luther, 'The Magnificat', 324; WA 7:570, 30-33.

⁵³ Both the Old and New Testaments contain numerous mentions of the power of God's breath, beginning with *Genesis 2:7* ('Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being'). The link to music is made most explicitly in *Psalms 150:6* 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!'

Having finished *singing* about herself and the good things she had from God, and having *sung* His praises, Mary now rehearses all the works of God that He works in general in all men, and *sings* His praise also for them, teaching us to understand the work, method, nature, and will of God.⁵⁴

Luther then goes on to explain that in the subsequent four verses (Luke 1:50–53), Mary will enumerate the six divine works (mercy, breaking of spiritual pride, putting down the mighty, exalting the lowly, filling the hungry and sending away the rich empty), ‘portraying Him so well that it could not be done better’.⁵⁵ This process is apparently concluded by the beginning of verse 1:54 (‘He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy.’):

After enumerating the works of God in her and in all men, Mary returns to the beginning and to the chief thing. She concludes the Magnificat by mentioning the very greatest of all God’s works—the Incarnation the Son of God. She freely acknowledges herself as the handmaiden and servant of all the world, confessing that this work which was performed in her was not done for her sake alone, but for the sake of all Israel.⁵⁶

This is in fact a genuine return, for the mention of the ‘servant Israel’ reminds Luther of Mary’s initial declaration of herself as the handmaiden in Luke 1:48. We see a strategy that Luther uses throughout the Commentary: Mary seems to exert a kind of gravitational pull on Luther, for regardless of the various lengthy digressions on one or another theological point, Luther inevitably returns to some mention of Mary’s singing in the present tense, as if he were describing an actual performance. What is more, these reiterations function as a kind of ritornello that reveals an implicit division of the *Magnificat* into three sections. In the first three lines (Luke 1:46–8), Mary sings her praise of God and defines her low estate, lauding him for all he has done for her; in the second part (Luke 1:49–53) she sings in ‘one breath’ of God’s six great works; and in the final part (Luke 1:54–5), she returns to the ‘beginning’—her own low estate—and describes the Incarnation and the fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham (see Table 1).

Mary may no longer be the object of veneration as she was for Catholics. As mentioned above, she merits Luther’s praise precisely because of her low estate and acceptance of God’s grace with no concern for herself, her example thus offering many lessons, particularly for women. But what Luther does hold in the highest esteem is the special power of her singing and the value of her lessons, which must be heard and understood as coming not only from her experience but also from the lips of this ordinary human woman—a point that may well have been particularly inspirational for Bach and his colleagues.

⁵⁴ Luther, ‘The Magnificat’, 331; WA, 7:577, 17–20. Emphasis added.

⁵⁵ Luther, ‘The Magnificat’, 331; WA, 7:577, 30–34.

⁵⁶ Luther, ‘The Magnificat’, 349–50; WA, 7:595, 28–33.

Table 1: Overview of Luther's hypothetical sections of the *Magnificat* compared with Bach's settings, with scoring of BWV 243a, BWV 243, and tonal structure

Movement (BWV)	Verse with Luther's Divisions	Luther's Comments about Mary	Scoring BWV 243a	Scoring BWV 243	Key
243/1: Magnificat anima mea	I. Luke 1:46. My soul magnifies God, the Lord.	We are to let the hymn serve this threefold purpose; for she sang it not for herself alone, but for us all, to <i>sing</i> it after her. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 306; WA 7: 553, 20-22]	Sop. I, II, Alto, Ten., Bas.; Tromba I, II, III in E-flat; Timp.; Ob. I, II; Viol. I, II, Vla.; Cont.	Sop. I, II, Alto, Ten., Bas.; Tromba I, II, III in D; Timp.; Flauto trav. I, II; Ob. I, II; Viol. I, II, Vla.; Cont.	I
243/2: Et exultavit	Luke 1:47. And my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour.	Thus, she truly can <i>sing</i> , 'My spirit rejoices in God my saviour.' It is indeed a spirit that exults only in faith and rejoices not in the good things of God that she felt, but only in God, whom she did not feel and who is her Salvation, known by her in faith alone. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 311; WA 7: 558, 25-8]	Same as BWV 243	Sop. II; Viol. I, II, Vla.; Cont.	I
243/3: Quia respexit	Luke 1:48. For He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden. For behold, henceforth ... will call me blessed.	Mary begins with herself and <i>sings</i> what He has done for her... [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 318; WA 7: 565, 1-3] Note that she does not say men will speak all manner of good of her, praise her virtues, exalt her virginity or her humility, or sing of what she has done. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 321; WA 7: 567, 34-6]	Sop. I; Ob. I; Cont.	Sop. I; Ob. d'amore I; Cont.	vi iii
243/4: Omnes generationes	Luke 1:48. ...all generations...	The Virgin Mary means to say simply that her praise will be sung from one generation to another so that there will never be a time when she will not be praised. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 324; WA 7: 570, 16-17]	Sop. I, II, Alto, Ten., Bas.; Ob. I, II; Viol. I, II, Vla.; Cont.	Sop. I, II, Alto, Ten., Bas.; Flauto trav. I, II; Ob. d'amore I, II; Viol. I, II, Vla.; Cont.	
243/5: Quia fecit mihi magna	II. Luke 1:49. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and Holy is His name	Here she sings in one breath of all the works that God has done to her, and observes the proper order. In the preceding verse she sang of God's regard and gracious good toward her, which is indeed the greatest and chief work of grace, as we have said. Now she comes to the works and gifts. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 324; WA 7: 570, 30-33]	Same as BWV 243	Bas.; Cont.	V

Table 1 (cont.)

<i>Movement (BWV)</i>	<i>Verse with Luther's Divisions</i>	<i>Luther's Comments about Mary</i>	<i>Scoring BWV 243a</i>	<i>Scoring BWV 243</i>	<i>Key</i>
243/6: Et misericordia	Luke 1:50. 'And His mercy is on those who fear Him, from generation to generation.'	Having finished singing about herself and the good things she had from God, and having sung His praises, Mary now rehearses all the works of God that He works in general in all men and sings His praises also for them... [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 331; WA 7: 577, 17-20] That, mark you, is a right soul, and one that fears God. There is God's mercy, as the Mother of God sings. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 335; WA 7: 581, 19-20]	Alto, Ten.; Viol. I, II, Vla.; Cont.	Alto, Ten.; Flauto trav. I e Viol. I (all. Unis); Flauto trav II e Viol. II (all'unis.), Vla.; Cont.	ii
243/7: Fecit potentiam	Luke 1:51. He has shown strength with His arm, He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.	For Mary says: 'the proud in the imagination of their hearts'; that is, those who delight in their opinions, thoughts, and reason, which not God but their heart inspires, and who suppose that these are right and good and wise above all others. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 341-2; WA 7: 587, 27-31] With what mastery Mary here hits the perverse hypocrites! She looks not at their hands or in their eyes, but in their hearts when she says: 'the proud in the imagination of the hearts.' [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 342; WA 7: 588, 16-17]	Sop. I, II, Alto, Ten., Bas.; Tromba I, II, III, Timp.; Ob. I, II; Viol. I, II, Vla.; Cont.	Sop. I, II, Alto, Ten., Bas.; Tromba I, II, III, Timp.; Flauto trav. I, II; Ob. I, II; Viol. I, II, Vla.; Cont.	IV-I
243/8: Deposuit	Luke 1:52. He has put down the might from their seats. And exalted those of low degree.	Observe, however, that Mary does not say He breaks the seats, but that He casts the mighty from their seats. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 344; WA 7: 590, 3-4] Those of low degree are here not the humble, but all those who are contemptible and altogether nothing in the eyes of the world. It is the same expression that Mary applied to herself above... [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 345; WA 7: 591, 11-13]	Ten.; Viol. all' unis.; Cont.	Ten.; Viol. I e II unis.; Cont.	iii

<i>Movement (BWV)</i>	<i>Verse with Luther's Divisions</i>	<i>Luther's Comments about Mary</i>	<i>Scoring BWV 243a</i>	<i>Scoring BWV 243</i>	<i>Key</i>
243/9: Esurientes	Luke 1:53. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away.	...Mary does not say that He has filled the full and exalted those of high degree, but: 'He has filled the hungry and exalted those of low degree.' [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 347; WA 7: 593, 28-30] Behold, how strong a comfort this is, that not man but God gives to the hungry, and that He not only gives them this or that but fills and fully satisfies them. Mary says, moreover: 'with good things'. That is to say, this fullness is to be harmless, wholesome, and saving, benefiting both body, soul, and all their powers. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 348; WA 7: 594, 30-35]	Alto; Flauto dolce I, II; Cont.	Alto; Flauto trav. I, II; Cont.	II
243/10: Suscepit Israel	III. Luke 1:54. He has helped His servant Israel in remembrance of His mercy.	After enumerating the works of God in her and in all men, Mary returns to the beginning and to the chief thing. She concludes the Magnificat by mentioning the very greatest of all God's works – the Incarnation of the Son of God. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 349-50; WA 7: 593, 28-30] Now, the Israel that is God's servant is the one whom the Incarnation of Christ benefits... That is the help of which Mary sings. [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 350; WA 7: 596, 17-20]	Sop. I, II, Alto; Tromba I; Violini e Viola all'unis.	Sop. I, II, Alto; Ob. I, II, all'unis; Cont. e Vclli, senza Violone e Bassoni	V/ii or vi
243/11: Sicut locutus est	Luke 1:55. As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed forever.	That is what the tender mother of this Seed means here by saying: 'He has helped His servant Israel, as He promised to Abraham and all his seed'. She found the promise fulfilled in herself... [Luther, 'The Magnificat', 353; WA 7: 599, 27-30]	Same as BWV 243	Sop. I, II, Alto, Ten., Bas.; Cont.	I
243/12: Gloria Patri			Sop. I, II, Alto, Ten., Bas.; Tromba I, II, III in E-flat; Timp.; Ob. I, II; Viol. I, II, Vla.; Cont.	Sop. I, II, Alto, Ten., Bas.; Tromba I, II, III in D; Timp.; Flauto trav. I, II; Ob. I, II; Viol. I, II, Vla.; Cont.	V-I

Bach's *Magnificat* through the lens of Luther's Commentary

The extent to which Luther's interpretation might have influenced Bach's setting of the *Magnificat*—or those by other Lutheran composers for that matter—is entirely a matter of conjecture. Certainly the weight placed on the *Magnificat* by Lutheran composers is in no small part a result of Luther's insistence upon keeping it in the liturgy and the special regard he had both for Mary and her canticle. While we can assume that Bach would have known Luther's Commentary, it is also possible that those features of his setting that seem most indebted to Luther's description are part of the conventions of *Magnificat* settings that would have filtered down to Bach.⁵⁷ That this might be the case, for instance, is suggested by Stephen Rose, who demonstrates that Johann Schelle's *Magnificat* anticipates features that would be adopted by Bach.⁵⁸ Implicit in this exercise is the notion that the *Magnificat* does not have a stable meaning, but—like the Madonnas painted by Cranach the Elder—one that changes according to the liturgical context and the beliefs of the individual listeners and beholders, be they Catholic or Lutheran, Pietist or Orthodox, even male or female.

Exploring the essence of Mary in Bach's *Magnificat*—or any setting of this text—is less straightforward than examining an image of the Madonna, for in the *Magnificat* we do not find a dramatic representation of the Virgin in the manner of an oratorio or even the Passions where Bach, as he does elsewhere, avoids a pseudo-operatic identification of individual voices with characters.⁵⁹ Instead, the sense of Mary's subjectivity is split among the chorus and voices, which together provide an arguably more compelling version of the Virgin's canticle than would have been possible with a single voice.⁶⁰ This is accomplished in several ways. First of all, since this is a song that is 'performed' by a single character rather than a dialogue, scoring—and particularly vocal scoring—is of critical importance,

⁵⁷ At the time of the composition of *Magnificat*, Bach had already probably acquired the complete works of Martin Luther in German in the edition published in Jena in 8 volumes (one of 1555, 1560, 1564, 1567, 1575, 1590, and 1615 edn). The *Magnificat* Commentary appears in *Die Erste Teil aller Bücher und Schriften des theuren seligen Mans. Mart. Luther* on ff. 476r–501 in all but the 1555 edition, where appears on ff. 450r–475. For a digital version of the 1567 edition, see dfg-viewer.de/show/?tx_dlf%5Bpage%5D=987&tx_dlf%5Bid%5D=http%3A%2F%2Fdigitale.bibliothek.uni-halle.de%2Ffoai%2F%3Fverb%3DGetRecord%26metadataPrefix%3Dmets%26identifier%3D993591&tx_dlf%5Bdouble%5D=0&cHash=f09c3fdc787b39937ff513d9db2e102b. See also Robin A. Leaver, *Bachs Theologische Bibliothek* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler, 1983), 25 and 56–7. I am grateful to Michael Marissen for pointing this out to me.

⁵⁸ *Leipzig Church Music from the Sherard Collection*, xvii–xviii.

⁵⁹ John Butt (*Bach's Dialogue with Modernity*, 198) observes that in the Passions Bach's 'scoring goes against the traditional operatic ends of representation because representation is only part of what these Passions might actually do'. Christoph Wolff ('Under the Spell of Opera? Bach's Oratorio Trilogy', in Daniel R. Melamed (ed.), *J. S. Bach and the Oratorio Tradition*, *Bach Perspectives*, 8, Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011, 1–12) makes a similar point about Bach's 'de-emphasis drama' and the 'deliberate change from theatrical to devotional music' in his study of the Easter Oratorio (p. 9). This, however, does not preclude the fact that, as John Butt points out, both Bach and his listeners might 'capitalise on existing opera devices' (p. 198), in which gender plays no small role.

⁶⁰ On the notion of split subject position in the St Matthew Passion, see Butt, *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity*, 83.

colouring and shaping the affect in subtle ways that create the requisite dramatic contrasts and determine how a given segment of text might be understood. Bach's scoring practices, regardless of whether boys or women were singing, reflect implicit notions about gender, a point to be considered below, and are some of the tools that allow him to evoke Mary's voice. Secondly, we can look to Bach's choice of affect, particularly in those moments in the canticle in which Mary—as understood by Luther—is either expressing some notion of self or is said to be singing in a given mood. There is also the question of the organisation; for if, as I have suggested above, Luther's repeated references to Mary's singing are significant in defining a tripartite structure to the canticle, we might wonder if Bach's organisational plan for his *Magnificat* might in some way reflect that understanding of the canticle. Finally, there is the question of liturgical purpose; *Magnificats* in Latin were an essential part of the Vespers service for any major festival, however, if the work were to be linked specifically with Marian Feasts or the Feast of the Visitation in particular, then Bach would have had more reason to highlight the unique qualities of Mary's voice that so preoccupied Luther.

Notably, there is ample evidence from the compositional history of the work to suggest that aspects of Luther's Commentary may well have shaped Bach's conception of it. As is well known, Bach composed this work in two different versions. The earliest surviving version is the E-flat *Magnificat*, BWV 243a, which scholars have long believed was first performed for Christmas in Leipzig in 1723 in part because of the hymns or *laudes* included in the manuscript, the interpolation of which made the *Magnificat* appropriate for the Feast of the Nativity—and would render Luther's tripartite division of the canticle difficult to perceive. In his classic essay on the *Magnificat*, Robert Marshall argued from the evidence of the manuscript that 'the four supplementary movements were not composed until the entire standard Latin text had been set'.⁶¹ Bach might have known at the outset that he would be adding the Christmas hymns, but—as Marshall notes—he 'preferred to approach the Latin *Magnificat* as an integral work that should maintain its formal integrity and self sufficiency'. For Marshall, then, the 'Lutheran composer's challenge' was to find a logical way to integrate those hymns into the *Magnificat*.⁶²

But perhaps another challenge was to find a way to capture the sense of the earthbound Mary of low estate, whose personal perspective, character, and singing voice were an essential part of the meaning of the canticle as described by Luther. In fact, there would be no better way to do that than to remind worshippers of the occasion upon which Mary sang the canticle—the visit to her cousin Elizabeth. And this is exactly what Bach did. In a seminal article from 2003, Andreas Glöckner argues persuasively that not only was the E-flat version composed far more rapidly than had previously been imagined, but that the first performance was for the Feast of the Visitation on 2 July 1723; the four *laudes* were added later that year for Christmas.⁶³ This is a critical point. As we have already noted, the Feast of the Visitation presented multiple opportunities for

⁶¹ Marshall, 'Magnificat', 170

⁶² Marshall, 'Magnificat', 165.

⁶³ Glöckner, 'Bachs Es-Dur-Magnificat BWV 243a', 41-2.

worshippers to hear the story of Mary's encounter with Elizabeth, and the liturgy for that day in fact reinforced the notion that the canticle came directly from Mary's lips. But lest there be any ambiguity, this point was clarified in the cantata that Bach composed for and performed on the same occasion, Cantata 147, *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben*.

The cantata was based on a text by Salomo Frank, which Bach had set previously (BWV 147a) for the Fourth Sunday in Advent in 1716 in Weimar.⁶⁴ However, it was necessary to amend this text in order to make it appropriate for the Feast of the Visitation. As Dürr notes: '[t]he principal theme—the acknowledgement of Jesus, originally by John the Baptist—is reinterpreted to refer to Mary, whose song of praise, The *Magnificat*, is a grateful acknowledgement of God in which Christendom is called to join.'⁶⁵ The new meaning is made particularly clear in the second movement, the tenor recitative:

<i>Gebenedeiter Mund!</i>	Blessed mouth!
<i>Maria macht ihr Innerstes der Seelen</i>	Mary makes known the innermost part
<i>Durch Dank und Rühmen kund;</i>	Of her soul through thanks and praise;
<i>Sie fänget bei sich an,</i>	She begins with herself,
<i>Des Heilands Wunder zu erzählen,</i>	Recounting the wonders the Saviour
<i>Was er an ihr al seiner Magd getan.</i>	Has done for her as His handmaid. ⁶⁶

The tenor recitative here not only refers to *Magnificat*, as would be appropriate for the Feast, but paraphrases Luther: Mary 'begins' with herself ('the innermost part of her soul') and then recounts God's many wonders. Whether or not Bach was the author of these words (Dürr, significantly, makes mention of evidence in the autograph that Bach himself altered the text in at least one instance), it is apparent that the added recitative provides the extra layer of interpretation for the *Magnificat*, reminding the listeners of the special nature of Mary's voice, as emphasised by Luther. The sustained violins and violas in the recitative impart a kind of magical quality to these words (Ex. 3). (The specifically female elements are underscored again in the final recitative, in which Bach marks musically the moment in which the baby stirs in Elizabeth's womb 'while Mary's mouth brings the offering of her lips'.⁶⁷) Indeed, it is also possible that Cantata 147 was performed along with the D-major *Magnificat* for the Feast of the Visitation in 1733. One persuasive piece of evidence in favour of this hypothesis is the fact that the latter versions of both *Magnificat* and Cantata 147 called for an oboe d'amore rather than the oboe and oboe da caccia that had been used previously.⁶⁸

Yet the point is not so much whether or not Bach was influenced by Luther's Commentary in the process of composing the *Magnificat*, but rather that our reading of Luther's views on the canticle illuminates aspects of the work,

⁶⁴ Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, rev. and trans. Richard D. P. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 672.

⁶⁵ Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, 672.

⁶⁶ Translation based on Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, 670.

⁶⁷ Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, 672.

⁶⁸ Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, 674.

particularly those that relate to the voice of Mary, which might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Or to put in another way: how might our understanding of Bach's *Magnificat* change if we look at it through the lens of Luther's Commentary?

Violin I/II

Viola

Tenor

Continuo

1

Ge-be-ne-dei-ter Mund! Ma-ri-a macht ihr In-ner-stes der See-len durch Dank und Rüh-men kund; sie

5

fän-get bei sich an, des Hei-lands Wunder zu er-zäh-len, was er an ihr, als sei-ner Magd, ge-tan.

Example 3: Cantata 147: Tenor recitative 'Gebendeiter Mund!' (BWV 147/2), bb. 1-8

Let us consider how Luther's conception might have influenced the structure of the *Magnificat*—the 'formal integrity' that Marshall suggests was part of Bach's initial planning. Table 1 lists the individual verses of the *Magnificat*, including as well many of Luther's specific references to Mary for that verse, the scoring for both versions of the *Magnificat*, and the tonal structure. If we take as our guide Luther's three sections discussed above, certain elements of Bach's vocal scoring seem to fall into focus. The first verse, sung by the entire chorus, invokes the collective nature of the prayer that she sang not only for herself, but was then to be sung by everyone. The next two verses are the most unambiguous in their invocation of Mary and her song: in Luke 1:47, as we noted above, 'she begins with herself', rejoicing in the spirit of God her saviour, and in Luke 1:48 she considers his deep regard for her and her low estate. The fact that Bach chose to score both of these verses for solo soprano—and in fact two different sopranos whose timbral differences can underscore the affective shift—is by no means accidental, but in fact makes Mary's voice—and femininity—all the more explicit.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ This point is made explicitly by Terry, "The "Magnificat"", 14-15.

In movement 4, as Mary shifts from her consideration of herself to the works of God (see Table 1), Bach assigns the verse to the bass, the most drastic registral disjunction in the entire work. The elimination of the soprano voice may seem to disrupt any sense of Mary's presence. But of paramount importance is the fact that this is the moment at which, according to Luther, Mary stops speaking of *herself* and begins her enumeration of God's greatness, the focus of the second portion of the *Magnificat*. As she 'rehearses' the six great works over the next few verses, Bach provides us with a range of scorings, avoiding the solo soprano voice, even as Luther avoids mention of Mary's performance. It is only with Luke 1:54, when Luther invokes Mary's 'return to the beginning', that the soprano solo voice is heard again, now in the context of the trio 'Suscepit Israel'.

We might also observe how the tonal scheme seems to support this implicit tripartite organisation. The move to the dominant for the setting of Luke 1:49 articulates the new section, a secure point of arrival, and an appropriate tonal area in which to begin the exposition of God's works in 'one breath'. Bach will briefly reaffirm the tonic in the chorus 'Fecit potentiam', for which he also brings back the full orchestra for the first time.⁷⁰ It is of note, however, that Bach's setting of the final verse in this section, Luke 1:53, is set in E major, the sharpest key used in the *Magnificat*, and the only key outside the tonal ambitus for D major; thus both the key and the affect heighten the positive sense with which Bach has imbued this verse. As Mary finishes 'enumerating the works of God' and, accordingly to Luther, 'returns to the beginning', Bach, too, initiates a kind of return, descending flatward to a somewhat ambiguous B minor that recalls the 'Quia respexit' (movement 3), and the unsettled ending (considered in greater detail below) heightening the sense of inevitability that marks the return to D major for 'Sicut locutus est'. This sense of arrival is made all the more definitive (and eternal) with the recapitulation of the first movement's opening ritornello so suitable for the final words of the Lesser Doxology: 'sicut erat in principio'.

If we move beyond tonal considerations, we can observe as well the many ways in which numerous surface details of the music and the chosen affects correspond with and even elucidate some of the issues explored in the Luther Commentary (refer to Table 1 throughout this discussion). As familiar as it is now, the opening ritornello of the first chorus is remarkable from a number of perspectives. The joyful entrance of the strings on the downbeat of the first bar, with the emphasis of the timpani on beat 1, creates a kind of springboard for the ritornello, setting an impetuous process into motion, almost as if the canticle had already begun some moments previously and we are only now permitted to hear the heavenly music. There is a sense of frenetic movement engendered by the

⁷⁰ Marshall, 'Magnificat', (p. 168) also uses the scoring as a guide to the work's organisation, though for him the choruses provide the structural pillars, which he hypothesises were part of Bach's planning, and are also an important element in the way the work is experienced by listeners. He calls attention to the increasing number of vocal soloists in the movements between each of the internal choruses, creating a sense of increasing tension or drama. This may well be the case; one organisational plan does not preclude the existence of other modes of conceptualising this movements. His schema also underscores the fact that the 'two tonic pillars enclose at each end movements in the relative minor (Movements 3 and 10)', and these, as we noted above, are the two verses most specifically associated with Mary's low estate.

energetic scales in the oboes, punctuated by the arpeggios in the brass, which – in the context of a triple-metred movement – lose their martial implications. Orchestral colour matters here, for the flutes, with their sustained Ds in the opening bars, create a kind of softening halo, but ultimately cannot resist the pull of the other instruments, and infected by the celebratory mood, join in the passagework.⁷¹ The affect is one of energy and unrestrained joy, an announcement that something extraordinary is about to occur.

The entrance of the voices for Mary's first utterance, the word 'Magnificat' in bar 30, is no less remarkable (Ex. 4).

30 Tr I/Fl I/Ob I/Vn I

Tr II/Fl II/Ob II/Vn II

[Tr III]/Va

Soprano I

Soprano II

Continuo

Ma - - gni - fi - cat,

Ma - - gni - fi - cat,

Example 4: *Magnificat*: Entrance of Soprano I and II (BWV 243/1), bb. 30–32

The noise and bluster give way as the first and second sopranos enter with modest restraint in a relatively low register, singing in parallel thirds; with the momentary absence of the continuo or any accompaniment for that matter, listeners suddenly find themselves focusing solely on the voices.⁷² This is not a triumphal representation of the *Regina Coeli*, the Queen of Heaven, praised in the hymn that Luther had criticised.⁷³ Indeed, the shyness here recalls Luther's subsequent comment: 'She is not puffed up, does not vaunt herself or proclaim with a loud voice that she is become the Mother of God.'⁷⁴ The melodic material borrowed from the opening oboe passages acquires a new significance when it is sung. Indeed, there is something almost girlish about the movement's characteristic trill figure, which lasts just a little bit too long, before it spills out almost like a burst of laughter that cannot be suppressed; quickly, it is taken up by the rest of the chorus that luxuriates in almost instrumental fashion with the

⁷¹ Neither the transverse flutes nor the oboe d'amore were used in BWV 243a, both of which contribute to the special sonic world of the latter version, arguably heightening what I would term the 'Mary effect' (see Table 1).

⁷² Stephen Rose ('Introduction' to *Leipzig Church Music from the Sherard Collection*) calls attention to the similarity of this passage to Schelle's *Magnificat*, xviii.

⁷³ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 327–8; WA, 7: 573–4, 16–33.

⁷⁴ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 329; WA, 7:575, 15–16.

pure 'ah' vowel for 'Magnificat' and 'anima mea'. Bach's setting provides a sonic analogue to Luther's description of Mary's own sensation in this verse: 'It is as if she said: "My life and all my senses float in the love and praise of God and in lofty pleasures, so that I am no longer mistress of myself; I am exalted, more than I exalt myself, to praise the Lord".'⁷⁵ And the response of the modern worshipper, which we cited above: 'All words and thoughts fail us, and our whole life and soul must be *set in motion*, as though all that lived within us wanted to break forth into praise and singing.'⁷⁶

We also might well imagine that Luther's descriptions of Mary's singing of the subsequent verse 'Et exultavit' inspired Bach's setting. The focus in this verse is on the rejoicing of Mary's spirit not only in those things that she is able to feel personally, but also in the 'good things' of God that are understandable only through faith. Bach maintains the D major and triple metre (albeit with the somewhat lighter 3/8) so that the solo soprano emerges naturally out of the chorus, the laughter bubbling over into a joyful minuet (Ex. 5a). There is a buoyancy to the opening ritornello, engendered by the ascending sequence with its brief suggestion of A major and the playful demisemiquaver neighbour note in the bass that the soprano will annex for her climactic ascent to *f#*' in bar 30 (Ex. 5b). In keeping with Mary's modesty, Bach contrives for her melismas to focus exclusively on the praise of God (the syllable 'ta' in exultavit and the syllable 'De' in Deo). Mary exults in God her saviour in a style that—for Bach—is remarkably *galant*, or progressive in Robert Marshall's terms, the 3/8 metre lending the minuet a 'lighter, more modern' quality.⁷⁷ We might recall how Bach also used a 3/8 minuet for the expression of pure faith in the St John Passion (BWV 245/9) for the soprano aria 'Ich folge dir gleichfalls' (Ex. 6a) as well as for Lieschen's first aria in the Coffee Cantata, BWV 211/4 (Ex. 6b), in which (unexpectedly) the chromaticism and intricate ornamentation creates a somewhat more serious affect than that of the 'Et exultavit'. Charles Sanford Terry, who had viewed Bach's use of the solo aria for the *Magnificat* as unique among German composers, likewise observed that in this aria 'the gentle voice of the Madonna is heard, calm, and yet on a note of exaltation, of prayerful intensity, which declares itself in the soaring curve of the word "exultavit".'⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 302; WA, 7: 550, 4–8.

⁷⁶ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 307; WA, 7:554, 25–9. Emphasis added.

⁷⁷ Robert Marshall, 'Bach the Progressive: Observations on his Later Works', in *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach*, 23–58; originally published in *The Musical Quarterly*, 62/3 (1976), 313–57. See also Richard D. P. Jones, *The Creative Development of Johann Sebastian Bach, Volume II: 1717–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Jones calls attention to the 'high incidence' of dances in Bach's first cycle cantatas in Leipzig (1723–4), the period in which *Magnificat* was composed, citing in particular BWV 25/5 and BWV 65/6 (pp. 129–30).

⁷⁸ Terry, 'The "Magnificat"', 14.

1 Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Soprano II
Continuo

This musical score covers measures 1 through 8. It features five staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Soprano II, and Continuo. The key signature is two sharps (D major) and the time signature is 3/8. The Soprano II part is silent throughout these measures.

9
Et e - xul - ta - vit

This musical score covers measures 9 through 14. It features five staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Soprano II, and Continuo. The key signature is two sharps (D major) and the time signature is 3/8. The Soprano II part begins in measure 10 with the lyrics "Et e - xul - ta - vit".

Example 5a: *Magnificat*: Opening of 'Et exultavit' (BWV 243/2), bb. 1-14

29 Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Soprano II
Continuo

et e - xul - ta - -

This musical score covers measures 29 through 31. It features five staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Soprano II, and Continuo. The key signature is two sharps (D major) and the time signature is 3/8. The Soprano II part begins in measure 29 with the lyrics "et e - xul - ta - -".

Example 5b: *Magnificat*: 'Et exultavit' (BWV 243/2), bb. 29-31

Example 6a: Minuet in 3/8, 'Ich folge dir gleichfalls' (soprano aria) from St John Passion (BWV 245/9), bb. 14–20

Example 6b: Minuet in 3/8, Lieschen's aria from BWV 211/4, bb. 22–27

Mary's modesty is brought to the fore in what is arguably her most personal and self-referential verse of the entire canticle: 'Quia respexit'. (Terry, too, remarked that in this movement, 'the Virgin's voice is heard'.⁷⁹) For Luther, however, Mary's low estate is only part of the story – for it is 'not her humility but God's regard [that] is to be praised'.⁸⁰ Bach's setting of this verse captures something of this contradiction. The descending vocal lines amply portray her low estate, but there is also a marked sensuality to the musical surface, with its ornaments, chromaticism and pronounced dissonances. Indeed, the ascending sequential pattern in the opening ritornello lifts her into the heavens, as the oboe d'amore takes the listener on a dizzying ascent prior to the precipitous drop of nearly two octaves as it settles into the proper register to prepare for the vocal entrance (Ex. 7). One might hear this solo as a kind of musical analogue to the Cranach Madonna panels, as it captures both the Virgin's beauty and reticence: in the second half of the aria, for instance, he lavishes attention on the word 'ecce' (behold) as if she herself is marvelling in the very idea that generations would find her blessed. Robert Cammarota has provided a sensitive discussion of this aria, acknowledging the influence of Luther's Commentary and proposing that there should be no abrupt change in tempo with the entrance of the chorus: 'The intense joy experienced by the Virgin changes to exaltation, appropriately enough, at the words "omnes generationes", though without a change in

⁷⁹ Terry, 'The "Magnificat"', 15.

⁸⁰ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 314; WA, 7: 561, 17–19.

tempo—which Bach sets rhetorically as an elaborate permutation fugue.’⁸¹ Indeed, the chorus literally echoes the praises of the generations to come, that Mary herself in her modesty can only dimly imagine. That ‘echo’ is implicit as well in Bach’s decision to use a pair of oboes d’amore in the ‘omnes generationes’, something he did not do in BWV 243a.

Adagio

Oboe d'amore

Soprano I

Continuo

Qui - a - re - spe - xit hu - mi - li - ta - tem,

Example 7: *Magnificat*: ‘Qui Respexit’ (BWV 243/3), bb. 1–7

Bach uses varied scorings and affects in the second section of the *Magnificat*, as Mary prepares to sing ‘in one breath’ of his six great works: His might, His mercy, His strength, the casting down the proud, the exalting the poor and the lowly, and feeding the hungry. For the representation of might, the bass voice has the requisite authority, and indeed, as compared with the fluid sensuality of the previous movement, Bach gives us a sense of clarity and firmness, engendered not only by the lack of obbligato instrumental accompaniment (this is the only continuo aria in the *Magnificat*) but also the angularity and brevity of the initial motive, with its bold, almost pompous descent down the octave to the lower A. God’s might here is manifest in command of the range, the assertiveness with which the bass negotiates the skips from the upper to the lower register and back again, whether by skip or step.

Although scored for alto and tenor (rather than soprano), ‘Et misericordia’ allows Mary’s voice to emerge with both power and tenderness, reminding us that Luther’s emphasis on God’s willingness to be merciful to those poor in spirit naturally brings one back to the Virgin, who, anticipating motherhood, might sing a lullaby. For this movement Bach chooses an unusual sonic palette of transverse flutes, muted violins and viola, while the 12/8 metre invokes the gentle rocking motion of the pastorale, a genre that usually implies innocence and

⁸¹ Cammarota, ‘On the Performance of “Quia respexit...”’, 473.

purity.⁸² Yet this is no ordinary pastorale, for the minor key and chromatic descending bass create in a kind of hybrid between an operatic sleep scene and a lament, the mournful affect heightened by the uncanny sound of the alto and tenor voices vying for the same registral space (Ex. 8).

Flauto traverso I
Violino I con sordino

Flauto traverso II
Violino II con sordino

Viola con sordino

Alto

Tenore

Continuo

Et mi-se - ri - cor - di - a _____ , mi-se - ri - cor - di - a _____ a pro - ge -

Et mi-se - ri - cor - di - a _____ , mi-se - ri - cor - di - a _____ a pro - ge - ni - e

ni - e in _____ pro - ge - ni - es;

in _____ pro - ge - ni - es, in _____ pro - ge - ni - es;

Example 8: *Magnificat*: 'Et misericordia' (BWV 243/6), bb. 4-8

It is not surprising that Bach would use the entire chorus for 'Fecit potentiam', as the focus here is on God's strength and His mercy for all eternity. Luther offers a secondary translation that accentuates one of the canticle's major themes, the

⁸² Doris Finke-Hecklinger, *Tanzcharaktere in Johann Sebastian Bachs Vokalmusik: Studien zu ihrer Rhythmik und zur Chronologie*, Tübinger Bach-Studien, 6 (Trossingen: Hohner, 1970), 81-2.

unworthiness of the prideful and the power of his mercy: 'God is a Lord whose works are of such a nature that He mightily scatters the proud and is merciful to those who fear Him.'⁸³ The strength of God's arm is aurally manifest in the lengthy and assertive melisma first heard in the tenor that migrates from voice to voice, punctuated by the robust, homophonic declarations of the rest of the chorus and orchestra. Bach's attention to the word 'dispersit' matches Luther's, who describes the scattering that occurs when men relinquish God's wisdom and allow themselves to be infused with pride. Indeed, the highly dramatic setting of the words 'mente cordis sui', following the dramatic diminished seventh chord on 'superbos', captures Mary's awareness according to Luther, of the frailty of the human heart: 'For Mary says: "the proud in the imagination of their hearts"; that is, those who delight in their own opinions, thoughts, and reason, which not God but their heart inspires...'⁸⁴

Bach's treatments of the subsequent two verses, 1:52 and 1:53, can be understood in the context of Luther's continued emphasis on the disparity between the proud, who should be cast down, and those of low degree who should be exalted and are worthy of receiving God's gifts. Earlier, in the 'Et misericordia', we heard the alto and tenor voices intertwined. With these two movements we hear the voices in juxtaposition and with contrasting affects that make this difference apparent. As Luther notes, when God casts down the proud, the lowly do not replace them in high positions; rather he allows them to be 'exalted spiritually'. In the aria 'Deposuit', for tenor and unison violin obbligato – arguably the most virtuosic aria in the entire work – the casting down is represented literally in the fierce opening gesture with the violence of the descending scales and the vain attempts to return to the upper register (not to mention the emphasis on the tritone); on the other hand, the melismas on 'exultavit' (bars 43f.) with the tied crotchet and subsequent semiquavers might be heard as an echo of the spiritual exultation in the second movement, with the stepwise descent on the word 'humiles' recalling Mary's low estate in movement three (Ex. 9). In discussion of Luke 1:53, Luther again offers a clarification, namely that the good things are only provided for those of low estate. After the aggression of the preceding F-sharp minor aria, the warmth of the alto voice in the 'Esurientes', decorated by the flauti traversi, which play in parallel thirds with the pizzicato bass, provide more than touch of the worldly *style galant* that has seemed so distinctly feminine as in the 'Et exultavit'. The sweetness in the imitation between the voice and obbligato flutes (as in bar 8) or between the flutes (as in bar 31) further enhances the sense of continual reassurance, of pleasure, satisfaction, and the good and wholesome things that God promises to

⁸³ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 339; WA, 7:585, 21–25.

⁸⁴ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 341; WA, 7:587, 27–30. Michael Marissen, *The Social and Religious Designs of J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) explores this notion of Luther's inverted world in relation to Bach's scoring practices, demonstrated in Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no. 4 in the demoting of the violin and raising up of the recorders (pp. 75–6). See also Marissen's thoughtful consideration of the theological implications of Bach's scoring in particular to express the notion of the *mundus inversus* in 'On the Musically Theological in J. S. Bach's Church Cantatas', *Lutheran Quarterly*, 16/1 (2002), 48–64.

those of low estate (Ex. 10). Might the cadence (bar 43, not shown), which is played only by the continuo, offer a pointed commentary on the notion of emptiness that the rich who trust not in God are destined to suffer?

Violino I/II

Tenor

Continuo

34 De - po - - su - it, de - po - - su - it po -

39 ten - tes de - se - - de et

43 ex - al - ta - - - - (a-)

Example 9: *Magnificat*: 'Deposuit' (BWV 243/8), bb. 34-45

Flauto traverso I/II

Alto

Continuo

8 E - su - ri - en - tes im - ple - vit bo - nis, e - su - ri - en - tes im - ple - vit bo - nis et

Example 10: *Magnificat*: 'Esurientes' (BWV 243/9), bb. 8-11

Regardless, the gentleness of this gesture provides an ideal pivot for the final portion of the *Magnificat* which begins with the 'Suscepit Israel'. Having enumerated the works of God in herself and all men, Mary now sings once again in B minor, the key in which she had initially defined herself as the handmaiden

honoured by God's regard in the 'Quia respexit'. Terry had automatically associated the trio with the Virgin's voice; in his words, this is the moment in which 'Mary pours out her heart in thankfulness for the blessing vouchsafed her'.⁸⁵ Bach makes the link between the handmaiden of the 'Quia respexit' and the servant Israel explicit here; we can note in particular how the initial soprano melody in both movements ascends step by step to the *f#'* falling back to hover around the *a#'* (Ex. 11). Bach discards the overt chromaticism and fantasia-style of the 'Quia respexit'—and its unrelenting downward motion associated with Mary's low estate—in favour of the prevailing quaver pace and lilting triple metre as Israel—the 'puerum suum'—is lulled to sleep. The hypnotic melding of the ascending and descending lines might well be heard to dramatise the notion of inversion (casting down of the rich and raising up of the lowly) so critical to Luther's interpretation of the canticle. The singularity of Mary's voice is not obscured by the addition of the second soprano and alto; rather these two additional treble, feminised voices provide a magical sonic enhancement, an 'ethereal element', as Lundberg notes, that heightens the female element, in no small part a result of the use of the cantus firmus in the upper register, which acts as a kind of halo.⁸⁶ The mystical quality is further underscored by the lack of finality in the cadence that closes the movement, which we might hear variously as a half-cadence or a phrygian close on B with a Picardy third (Ex. 12). Indeed, the sense of mythical suspension recalls the soprano's ornamented cadence in Cantata 106.

Oboe I/II

Soprano I

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

Alto Su-sce - pit I - sra-el

Continuo (e Violoncelli senza Violone e Fagotti) Su-sce - pit I - sra-el pu - e - rum

Example 11: *Magnificat*: 'Suscepit Israel' (BWV 243/10), bb. 1-4

⁸⁵ Terry, 'The "Magnificat"', 24.

⁸⁶ Lundberg, *Tonus Peregrinus*, 249. Lundberg's discussion here is particularly relevant: 'In no cantus firmus setting of the *tonus peregrinus* prior to Bach's "Suscepit Israel" is the harmony so resourcefully varied over the prolonged "recitation" of the instrumental descant. Especially during the second recitation (bb. 20-25), the lower parts eloquently reinterpret the harmonic context in the manner of the *stylus phantasticus*. The overall high pitch of the piece (the accompanying voices no less than the chant) lends it an ethereal character that makes it stand out from the other movements of the *Magnificat*, an effect that has been interpreted in many different ways by modern scholars.'

Oboe I/II

35

Soprano I

di - ae - su - ae.

Soprano II

di - ae su - ae.

Alto

cor - di - ae su - ae.

Continuo

Example 12: *Magnificat*: 'Suscepit Israel' (BWV 243/10), bb. 35–37

The mood is broken decisively for the 'Sicut locutus est'. Indeed, we should perhaps not be surprised that this far more earthly movement, with its reference to the fathers and the seed of Abraham, is a fugue that, beginning with the bass, speaks with a kind of masculine authority, although the jolly turn figure (on the second syllable of 'locutus') and cut-time add a lightness and joyful sense of anticipation.

Bach's setting of the Lesser Doxology is particularly bold: the explosive wall of sound engendered by the triplets that ascend from bass to soprano seems to almost obliterate the differences between the masculine and the feminine or the earthly and the heavenly. Yet, by bringing back the opening material for the dance-like setting of 'Sicut erat in principio', Bach does in fact give the joyful Virgin the final word; in so doing, he seems to capture something of the sheer pleasure that Luther had imagined for Mary as she sang to Elizabeth. As noted earlier: 'My life and all my senses float in the love and praise of God and in lofty pleasures, so that I am no longer mistress of myself; I am exalted, more than I exalt myself, to praise the Lord.'⁸⁷

Bach's feminine voice

We have seen some of the ways in which Bach's encounter with Luther's Commentary may have shaped his composition of a Latin Magnificat for the Feast of the Visitation in Leipzig. Our consideration of the work through the lens of the Commentary elucidates some of the special qualities of this extraordinary work: how Bach's choice of scoring, affect, and key, employment of dance forms and *style galant* gestures might well be heard to embody Mary's female experience and voice, the 'blessed mouth' so celebrated in Cantata 147.

To accept the hypothesis that Bach's *Magnificat* might provide some access to Bach's notion of the female voice, however, we have to make a methodological and conceptual leap, implicit in the example from Cantata 106 at the outset of this

⁸⁷ See note 75.

essay – namely that in Bach’s music gender does matter. First, this requires that we accept the possibility that thinking about voice and gender in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even in Leipzig, was far more flexible than we might imagine today. Listeners throughout Europe had developed sophisticated ways of managing the frequent disparities between a singer’s vocal range, the character that he or she represented, and their biological sex, necessitated by admonitions against women’s singing in church and the increased popularity of the castrato. Male singers assumed the roles and attributes of female characters and (occasionally) female singers took on male roles, and very rarely did contemporaries even bother to comment on the discrepancy. Indeed, the notion that the vocal registers (soprano, alto, tenor and bass) carried some sort of inherent meaning in an abstract sense is implicit not only in the scoring conventions of numerous seventeenth and eighteenth-century composers, but is also discussed by any number of commentators. Charles Stanford Terry, for instance, had cited Giovanni Battista Doni – a source somewhat distant from Bach – to support his contention that Bach’s use of alto voice in the ‘Esurientes’ was significant:

Nearly a half a century before Bach’s birth, Giovanni Battista Doni concluded that each of the human voices was appropriate to record a particular emotion, even to represent a particular character. Bach probably was not familiar with a treatise, which as confidently allotted a soprano voice to Diana and Proserpine as a baritone to God Almighty. But he was as sensitive as his elder to the *nuances* of the human organ, and as consistent in his employment of them. Whenever an emotional situation touches him deeply, an Alto voice gives his feelings expression.⁸⁸

In fact, there are commentators closer to Bach both geographically and temporally who explore the specific associations of the various voice types, not without some gendered associations. In 1676, the Coburg theologian Theodore Schneider, for instance, provided the following description:

The bass is well appointed for the belief that seeing Jesus is the basis and foundation of our salvation; her soprano [*Discant*] climbs high, that is her prayer penetrates through the clouds and does not let up until seeing the All Mighty through it and covers the roof [of the sky], leaving the poor people below at the feet of the Lord Jesus; the alto brings forth the Holy Spirit himself and she pushes forward so that she does not cry out with her heart but rather with her mouth: Jesus, son of David, have mercy on us! The tenor offers a Christian life and the road of faith or the fruits of belief, of which in

⁸⁸ Terry, ‘The “Magnificat”’, 22. Emphasis in the original. Terry is referring to Giovanni Battista Doni, *Trattato del Musica scenica in Lyra Barberina* (Rome, 1640), vol. 2. For an English translation of the passage, see Carol MacClintock, *Readings in the History of Music in Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, 202–4. Andre Pirro (*The Aesthetic of Johann Sebastian Bach*, trans. Joe Armstrong, Lanham, MD and Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014, 283–5) also cites Doni to discuss Bach’s vocal scoring. He notes, however (p. 283 n.89), that it is ‘very probable that Bach did not know this work by Doni. I only cite it to show that the idea of characterising the different voices was already current.’

various in today's Gospel, looks away to another time how Your Love will be revealed to us.⁸⁹

Regardless of what the performance practice in Coburg might have been, Schneider in fact imagines a celestial chorus of angels and archangels who are boys, girls, men and women:

Among the elect in the celestial hall of happiness are the angels and archangels, about whom Dr Meyfarto spoke in a human terms, the chosen blessed children, boys and young virgins [with their] gracious treble, the young men and women [with their] pure alto, the adult men and women [with their] the joyful tenor to, and the brave old bass for some and everyone among this choir singing the most delicate *Symphonia* and *Melodia* with which God is not only praised, but raised with obvious pleasure to the heights of delight.⁹⁰

In his discussion of vocal ensembles in cantatas in his *Versuch einer kritischen Dichtkunst für die Deutschen*, Bach's contemporary, the Leipzig poet and writer Johann Christoph Gottsched, explains how ideas and concepts that are frequently invoked in vocal music are inherently masculine and feminine, and thus should be sung by high and low voices accordingly.

These might indeed be some males who are singing in the performance, a masculine Bass or Tenor voice for example, who portrays envy, scorn, pride, [and] the four seasons, and similarly the alto and discant for female persons [*weibliche personen*], who for example are held to represent love, beauty,

⁸⁹ Theodor Schneider, *Das Lieblich-klingende Orgeln und Saiten-Spiel, Bey der Einweyhung Zweyer Neuen schönen Orgel-Werck: Des Einen zwar zu Mupperg...* (Coburg: Mönch, 1676), C 2–3: 'Der Bass ist wohlbestell/ das war der Glaube/ den sahe JESUS/ der ist Basis und Grund unser Seligkeit; Ihr Discant steigt hoch/ das ist/ ihr Gebet dringet durch die Wolcken/ und lässet nicht abe[r]/ biß der Allerhöchste d[a]rein sehe/ sie decken das Dach oben auf/ und lassen den armen Menschen dem HERN JESU nieder vor die Füße; Der Heilige Geist führet selber den Alt, und treibet sie/ daß sie/ wo nicht mit dem Munde/doch mit dem Herten schreyen: JESU/ du Sohn David/ erbarm dich Unser! Der Tenor gibt ein Christlich Leben und Wandel oder die Glaubens-Früchte/ deren unterschiedliche im heutigen Evangelio herfür blicken/ wie Eure Liebe zu anderer Zeit hiervon unterrichtet wird.' While it is possible to construct an English translation of this that would avoid feminine pronouns (e.g. 'ihr Discant' could be rendered 'your soprano'), this doesn't make a great deal of sense, and Schneider only uses the pronouns 'sie' and 'ihr' in relation to the soprano and alto.

⁹⁰ Schneider, *Das Lieblich-klingende Orgeln und Saiten-Spiel*, [E 4v] (unmarked): 'Da werden die Engel und Erz-Engel/menschlicher Weise darvon mit Herrn D. Meyfarto [Johann Matthäus Mayfart] zu reden/ in dem himmlischen Freuden-Saal unter die Auserwehlten sich austheilen/ den seligen Kindern/Knaben und Jungfrauen den holdseligen Discant, den Jünglingen u. Jungfrauen den reinen Alt, den Männern u. Weibern den freudigen Tenor, und den Alten den tapffern Bass austheilen/ undieden [und jeden] seinen gewissen Chor anweisen/ darauf wird die allerzierlichste *Symphonia* und *Melodia* angehen/ mit welcher nicht allein GOTT wird gelobet/ sondern auch den Auserwehlten lauter Lust und Ergötzlichkeit gemacht werden.' I am grateful to the anonymous reader for suggesting this passage.

youth, reason, the fear of God, and so forth. How often this [principle] is violated I dare not even imagine, since it is everywhere these days.⁹¹

Gottsched may have been thinking primarily about secular cantatas, yet the basic idea is no less relevant in a sacred context, where basses and tenors should also be chosen to represent characters or ideas that are inherently masculine, while the discant is appropriate for female persons and attributes.⁹² That Gottsched would make such a recommendation is by no means surprising, for as Katherine Goodman has shown, eighteenth-century Leipzig nurtured its own version of the debate about women—the *querelles des femmes*—that was of such importance in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, particularly in the French salons that the Leipzig women sought to emulate.⁹³ Moreover, one of the primary champions of women's rights in Leipzig was Christiane Mariane von Ziegler, the only woman to provide poetry for Bach's cantatas.⁹⁴ For the women who were engrossed in this debate, Bach's *Magnificat*, performed in the context of the Feast of the Visitation, may well have provided support for their efforts, a reminder of the centrality of the domestic realm, or provided access to an otherwise unavailable female spiritual realm; men too might have looked to Mary's example as a model for their wives or daughters, or as a sonic analogue to an unattainable female ideal. Like the Cranach Madonnas, the *Magnificat*, so richly evocative, was flexible enough to serve any number of devotional needs.

Secondly, the fact that such debates about women were waged in various cities in Europe at critical moments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reminds us of something quite peculiar to the Baroque: that the nature of women and femininity was being contested during the same period in which the musical

⁹¹ Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Versuch einer Critischen Dichtkunst vor die Deutschen: durchgehends mit den Exempeln unserer besten Dichter erläutert*, 4th edn (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1751), 719–20: 'Sie sollten auch einer Mannsperson, die singend aufgeführt wird, eine männliche Bass- und Tenorstimme geben, z.E. dem Neide, dem Zorne, dem Stolze, den vier Jahreszeiten u. d. gl. den Alt und Discant aber für weibliche Personen, z.E. die Liebe, die Schönheit, die Jugend, die Vernunft, die Gottesfurcht, u.d. gl, behalten. Allein, wie oft dawider verstoßen wird, darf ich nicht erwähnen; denn es liegt allenthalben am Tage.' I am grateful to Markus Rathey for pointing this passage out to me. On Gottsched's attitudes about women, see Katherine R. Goodman, *Amazons and Apprentices: Women and the German Parnassus in the Early Enlightenment* (Woodbridge, UK and Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer and Camden House, 1999), 65–93; see also P. M. Mitchell, *Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–1766): Harbinger of German Criticism* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995).

⁹² In 'Bach's Oratorio Trilogy' (pp. 5–6), Christoph Wolff cites a passage that appears later in the same chapter in Gottsched's treatise (p. 728) in which he discusses the variety of the 'singing personae' in oratorios: 'Here now the poet must introduce biblical persons, from the gospels or other texts, even Jesus and God himself, or allegorical figures representing religious functions such as Faith, Love, Hope, the Christian Church, Sacred Bride, Shulamite, Daughter Zion, or Faithful Soul, and the like in a speaking manner so that the outcome corresponds to purpose and place.' It would seem evident in setting these texts that Gottsched would expect the composer to follow the same principles that he laid out earlier in the chapter, and that the 'Faithful Soul' like the 'Daughter of Zion' or Shulamite, would be understood as inhabiting a female subject position, even if a boy were singing.

⁹³ Goodman, *Amazons and Apprentices*, 94–136.

⁹⁴ See Mark A. Peters, *A Woman's Voice in Baroque Music: Mariane von Ziegler and J. S. Bach* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008).

and dramatic conventions for the solo voice were being established. Thus vocal music absorbed much of the ambiguity and tension that was intrinsic to pre and early Enlightenment notions about gender and sexual difference.⁹⁵ As styles and affects associated with Italian theatrical music were utilised in liturgical and devotional contexts, the musical devices associated with men, women, sexuality, and desire were also imported and transformed, without necessarily losing all traces of their original semiotic significance.

Nor did such borrowings only apply to the musical language. In *Mystical Love in the German Baroque*, Isabella van Elferen argues persuasively that the musical and poetic discourses of love in Lutheran mysticism borrow from the highly developed poetic language of Petrarchan love:

Devotional theologians and religious poets described the love of the faithful soul and Jesus as a bittersweet emotion, in which the believer yearns for the heavenly bridegroom just as acutely as petrarchists for Laura.⁹⁶

Implicit in van Elferen's study is the notion that the metaphors used to understand faith gained power precisely because of their similarity to other familiar aspects of human existence. How much easier is it to understand the soul's desire for Jesus when it can be seen as a gendered metaphor—even when the soul designated feminine is sung by a boy! It is precisely this kind of feminine yearning that seems to be operating in Cantata 106. Yet as we have seen throughout this study, with the *Magnificat*, the notion of a woman and a female voice is unambiguous. What Luther did was to bring Mary down to earth, to show that the words of the canticle that he valued so deeply came not from a divinity or even God, but in fact could only have been sung by a woman with no pretensions and of the lowest estate. Are we then to imagine that Bach—husband to the singer Anna Magdalena and father of musically-gifted daughters—would not have captured some of that sense and would have erased the earthly, feminine qualities that are so intrinsic to Luther's Mary?

Much has been written about the universal nature of Bach's music and its power to transcend the specific theological constructs for which it was composed and touch all human beings. John Butt cautions that the very urge to find this kind of universality is itself a symptom of modernity, and that some of the power of Bach's Passions, for instance, is in the dialogue between the modern and the pre-modern elements.⁹⁷ Our increased awareness of the centrality of Lutheran theology for Bach reminds us that a complete understanding of *Magnificat* is necessarily limited by our ability to transcend the temporal and spiritual gaps that separate the modern listener in the concert hall from the worshipper in Leipzig. Boys and men may have sung in those Leipzig performances of Bach's *Magnificat*, but the liturgy of the Feast of the Visitation would not have failed to

⁹⁵ See Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁹⁶ Isabella van Elferen, *Mystical Love in the German Baroque: Theology, Poetry, Music* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 321.

⁹⁷ Butt, *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity*.

remind worshippers that the canticle was indeed sung by the Virgin Mary from a feminine perspective—a point that is likely to be lost on modern audiences for whom the admonitions against female voices in the church seem quaint and antiquated. What allowed Bach to succeed in both venues was his ability to humanise abstract theological notions in his music and to use music's abstractions to conjure up the familiar stuff of human existence. This was possible only for a composer whose art was in some sense a reflection of the fullness of life—one in which women played no small role.

At the end of the dedication letter that prefaces the *Magnificat* Commentary, Luther writes:

May the tender Mother of God herself procure for me the spirit of wisdom profitably and thoroughly to expound this song of hers, so that your Grace as well as we all may draw from it wholesome knowledge and praiseworthy life, and thus come to chant and sing this Magnificat eternally in heaven.⁹⁸

Luther could scarcely have imagined how perfectly Bach would have achieved this goal.

⁹⁸ Luther, 'The Magnificat', 288; WA, 7: 545, 27–31.