

C. P. E. Bach's *Heilig*

One of my favorite pieces by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach also happens to be one of his favorite pieces. Near the end of his life, in April 1786, Bach organized a concert that can be viewed as a tribute to his musical forebears, with some of the choral music he valued most highly. The program began with the Credo from his father's Mass in B Minor, followed by the aria "I Know that my Redeemer Liveth" and the "Hallelujah" Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*. The second half of the concert was devoted to C. P. E. Bach's own music: an unidentified symphony, his Magnificat, and his *Heilig* "mit doppelten Chören."

Bach had long recognized the special quality of his *Heilig*, the work he chose as the concluding number of this retrospective concert. As early as 28 July 1778 Bach wrote to his publisher Johann Gottlob Immanuel Breitkopf about publishing the work at his own expense:

Additionally I have reserved a 2-chorus *Heilig* for the press. I have put the greatest and boldest effort in it to have an exceptional impact."¹

Two months later, he wrote to Breitkopf again:

... if I can hope for 100 subscribers, which will become apparent within 4 weeks, I want to come out with my Heilig; this Heilig is an attempt to inspire far greater attention and sentiment through entirely natural and ordinary harmonic progressions than one can attain with any amount of nervous chromaticism. It is to be my swan song of this type, and thereby serve the purpose that I may not be forgotten too soon after my death.²

The *Heilig* was published in July 1779 and was issued with the first collection of "Kenner und Liebhaber" Sonatas. Bach was pleased with the results and wrote to Breitkopf on 29 July 1779: "All of Hamburg is admiring with me the beautiful, artistic and extraordinary print of our *Heilig*. Che viva!"³ First on the list of 267 subscribers was Princess Anna Amalia of Prussia, and at the end of the list was Baron van Swieten in Vienna, who ordered 25 copies.

Bach's estate catalogue gives the place and date of composition as Hamburg, 1778.⁴ However, C. P. E. Bach first used the *Heilig* in an arrangement of his father's cantata *Es erhub sich ein Streit* (BWV 19), which was performed in 1776 for the Feast of St. Michael.⁵ Altogether, C. P. E. Bach inserted his double-choir

1. *CPEB-Letters*, 124. "Außerdem habe ich ein 2 chörichtes Heilig zum Drucke bestimmt. Hierin habe ich den meisten und kühnsten Fleiß bewiesen zu einer guten Ausnahme. Dies soll (vielleicht) in dieser Art das letzte seyn, damit ich einstens nicht so bald vergeßen werde." *CPEB-Briefe*, 1:686–87.

2. *CPEB-Letters*, 125. "wenn ich Hoffnung zu 100 Pränumeranten, habe, welches sich binnen 4 Wochen zeigen wird, wollte ich mit meinem Heilig herausrücken; dieses Heilig ist ein Versuch, durch ganz naatürliche und gewöhnliche harmonische Fortschreitungen eine weit stärker Aufmerksamkeit und Empfindung zu erregen, als man mit aller ängstlichen Chromatik nicht im Stande ist zu thun. Es soll mein Schwanen Lied, von dieser Art, seyn, und dazu dienen, daß man meiner nach meinem Tode nicht zu bald vergeßen möge." *CPEB-Briefe*, 1:694.

3. *CPEB-Letters*, 143. "Ganz Hamburg bewundert mit mir den Schönen Künstlichen u. außerordentlichen Druck unsers Heiligs. Che viva!" *CPEB-Briefe*, 1:765.

4. NV 1790, 55: "Heilig mit 2 Chören und einer Ariette zur Einleitung. H[amburg] 1778. Mit Trompeten, Pauken, und Hoboen."

5. See Ulrich Leisinger, "'Es erhub sich ein Streit' (BWV 19): Carl Philipp Emanuel Bachs Aufführungen im Kontext der Hamburgischen Michaelismusiken," *Bach-Jahrbuch* (1999): 105–26.

Heilig in six other choral works: in 1778 as the penultimate chorus in a cantata, *Wenn Christus seine Kirche schützt*, and in 1785 in *Der Frevler mag die Wahrheit schmähn*, both for the Feast of St. Michael; in 1780 and 1783 in his Easter cantata *Nun danket alle Gott*; in January 1785 in a birthday cantata, *Dank-Hymne der Freundschaft*; and finally, in 1786 for a cantata celebrating the completion of St. Michael's Tower.⁶

The piece begins with an *Einleitung*—a short introduction or arietta for solo alto and strings. This serves no liturgical function and seems to exist primarily to introduce the concept of divided choirs of “angels” and “people.” The text of the arietta explicitly refers to the Engel and Völker:

Lord, who is worthy to be served by **angels**, / and who is honored by all **peoples** who believe, / I thank you, Lord! / Let me praise you along with others! / I laud you! / And the **angels** and **people** joyfully sing your praises with me.

This leads immediately to the entrance of the Choir of Angels in an ethereal E-major tonality with a half cadence on C-sharp major that is followed by the contrasting rambunctious Choir of People in D major.⁷ The text of the *Heilig* itself is the German translation of the Latin *Sanctus*: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory.” After three statements of “Heilig” in both choruses (with choir 1 joining choir 2 on the final iteration), Bach launches into a double fugue on “Alle Lande sind seiner Ehren voll.” But in the middle of the fugue, Bach quotes the opening of the German *Te Deum* and the traditional chorale tune: “We praise thee, O God. We acknowledge thee to be the Lord.”

It is surely no coincidence that Bach often used his *Heilig* for the Feast of St. Michael, and St. Michael's Church in Hamburg was especially well-suited for the antiphonal effects between the two choirs of angels and people. On 25 October 1776 a Hamburg newspaper emphasized the effectiveness of the work in St. Michael's, where

... the Choir of Angels will be sung in the balcony of the church, and the Choir of People near the organ, but the fugue will be sung by both choirs, which cannot be done conveniently in other churches, for lack of room.⁸

As Bach grew older, he was interested in preserving his legacy, so that he would not be forgotten too quickly. He took great pains and financial risk to publish his best vocal music, including two oratorios—*Die Israeliten in der Wüste* and *Die Auferstehung und Himmelfahrt Jesu*—as well as *Klopstocks Morgengesang* and his double-choir *Heilig*. Thanks to its publication, the *Heilig* was a staple of the repertory well into the nineteenth century. In fact, Beethoven even performed it in one of his own concerts in December

6. For more information, see Paul Corneilson, “Zur Entstehungs- und Aufführungsgeschichte von Carl Philipp Emanuel Bachs ‘Heilig,’” *Bach-Jahrbuch* (2006): 273–89.

7. For a detailed discussion of the bold harmonic modulations in the *Heilig*, see Richard Kramer, “The New Modulation of the 1770s: C.P.E. Bach in Theory, Criticism, and Practice,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38 (1985): 551–92.

8. “... daß das Chor der Engel von der Höhe über dem Kirchen-Saal, und das Chor der Völker von der Orgel, die Fuge aber von beyden Chören zugleich gesungen werden wird, welches in den andern Kirchen des Raums wegen nicht füglich geschehen können.” Cited in Wiermann, 398.

1817.⁹ Bach himself was very proud of his double-choir *Heilig*, and as he prophesied, his *Heilig* is an impressive “swan song.”

The double-choir *Heilig* (Wq 217) is published in CPEB: CW, V/6.1, along with a facsimile of the autograph score and the first print published as a supplement to series V. The 1786 benefit concert was recreated and released on both DVD and CD in 2014 by the RIAS Kammerchor and Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, conducted by Hans-Christoph Rademann.

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9. See *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, ed. Elliott Forbes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 691.