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## The Whole Note – Toronto, Canada

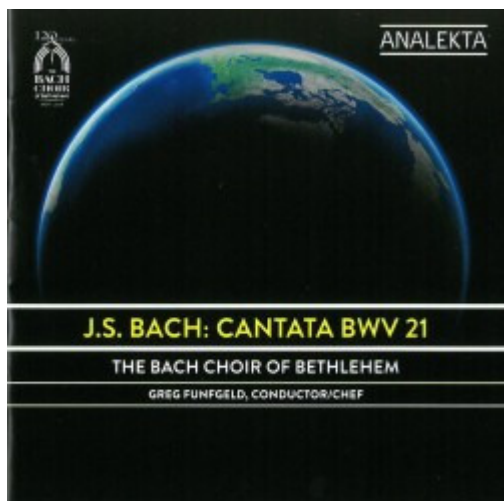
### Bach & Handel CDs Review

#### JS Bach: Cantata BWV 21 - Bach Choir of Bethlehem; Greg Funfgeld

Written by Raul da Gama

Category: [Vocal and Choral](#)

Published: 27 February 2019



#### JS Bach – Cantata BWV 21 Bach Choir of Bethlehem; Greg Funfgeld Analekta AN 2 9540 ([analekta.com/en](http://analekta.com/en))

Of all the musical commentaries on the biblical texts used in service – most importantly on the Gospel reading – the cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach are not only the most famous, but are also as pious as they are magnificent. These are the works that foretold the choral masterpieces such as the mighty *St John* and *St Matthew Passions* that came in 1724 and 1727 respectively.

The repertoire on this disc, *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis, Cantata BWV21*(1714) precedes those two great *Passions* as well as Bach's *B-Minor Mass* (1749). The cantata marks a transition from motet style on biblical and hymn text to operatic recitatives and arias on contemporary poetry; and Bach characterized the work as “*e per ogni tempo (and for all times)*,” indicating that due to its general theme, the cantata is suited for any occasion. On this disc it is bookended by two arias: *Heil und Segen* from *Gott, man lobet dich in der stille* (*God, You are praised in the stillness*) BWV120 and *Liebt, ihr Christen, in der Tat* from *Die Himmel erzählen die Erhe Gotte* (*The heavens tell the glory of God*) Cantata BWV76.

These gentle works get suitably sensitive performances from the Bach Choir of Bethlehem with sopranos Cassandra Lemoine and Rosa Lamoreaux, countertenor Daniel Taylor, tenor Benjamin Butterfield and baritone William Sharp investing everything as they solo with heartfelt intensity. Conductor Greg Funfgeld points up the drama of Bach's choral works with eloquent restraint, seriousness and joy.

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[Handel: Agrippina - Theater an der Wien; Patricia Bardon; Jake Arditti; Danielle de Niese; Filippo Mineccia; Balthasar Neumann Ensemble; Thomas Hengel Brock / Handel: Ode to St. Cecilia's Day - Bach Choir of Bethlehem; Greg Funfgeld](#)

Written by Stuart Broomer

Category: [Vocal and Choral](#)

Published: 27 February 2019

**Handel – Agrippina**

**Theater an der Wien; Patricia Bardon; Jake Arditti; Danielle de Niese; Filippo Mineccia; Balthasar Neumann Ensemble; Thomas Hengel Brock**  
Naxos 2.110579-80 ([naxosdirect.com](http://naxosdirect.com))

**Handel – Ode to St. Cecilia's Day**

**Bach Choir of Bethlehem; Greg Funfgeld**  
Analekta AN 2 9541 ([analekta.com/en](http://analekta.com/en))

These two recordings take very different approaches to two key works in Handel's life, including choices between period and modern instrumentation.



In 1709, in the early phase of Handel's operatic career, he was approached in Venice by Cardinal Vincenzo Grimani to set Grimani's satirical libretto based on Agrippina's machinations to have her son Nero named emperor of Rome. Generally regarded as Handel's first great opera – there's a treasure trove of arias – its ribald text has been inspiring radically contemporary stagings for the past 20 years, most notably by David McVicar. Theater an der Wien's production is a highly entertaining combination of musical purity and Robert Carsen's provocative staging. The Balthasar Neumann Ensemble plays period instruments and three of the eight roles are sung by countertenors. Meanwhile, there's a steely sheen to the furnishings, an iMac adorns a desk, and the fine mezzo-soprano Patricia Bardon, who has sung many of Handel's principal females, plays the title role, stalking the halls of power in a leather skirt; at other times, the scatterbrained Nero, sung by countertenor Jake Arditti, frolics poolside with bikini-clad maidens. There's some quickie desktop sex, a conspicuous issue of *Vogue*, onstage cameras and projections, staged news stories, a Mussolini-esque Claudio and, following the traditional happy ending, a gratuitous *grand guignol* bloodbath led by a mad Nero. Filmed in March 2016, staging that might have seemed over the top just three years ago approaches verisimilitude as our political culture increasingly resembles ancient Rome in decline.



With a 30-year leap in Handel's career, we come to his 1739 setting of John Dryden's *Ode for Saint Cecilia's Day*, here performed by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem and issued in commemoration of the choir's 120th anniversary and Greg Funfgeld's 35th as its conductor. The 88-voice choir is a Pennsylvania institution along with its annual Bach Festival and Bach Festival Orchestra. It's Handel on a relatively moderated but still grand scale, harkening back to 19th- and early 20th-century traditions. The orchestra is playing modern instruments, but there are only 27 of them, and that large choir provides depth and an impressive richness. Two fine Canadian singers appear as soloists, lending distinguished skills to the arias. Halifax-native, tenor Benjamin Butterfield, brings a brassy bravado to the drum and horn effusion of *The trumpet's loud clangor*, while Edmonton-born Cassandra Lemoine's refined soprano dovetails beautifully with Robin Kani's flute on *The soft complaining flute*. Lemoine's grace and clarity also highlight the full force of choir and orchestra in the sustained conclusion of *As from the pow'r of sacred lays*.