

Magnificat in E-flat Major BWV 243.1 (243a), Christmas version

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| 1. <i>Magnificat anima mea Dominum.</i> ¹ | 1. <i>My soul magnifies</i> ² <i>the Lord.</i> |
| 2. <i>Et exultavit</i> ³ <i>spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo.</i> ⁴ | 2. <i>And my spirit has rejoiced in God my savior.</i> |

GENERAL NOTE: The text of the Magnificat (Luke 1:46b-55), used in the afternoon (vespers) service, is Mary's song of praise in the presence of Elizabeth (described in Luke 1:36 as Mary's "kinswoman"), in recognition of the fulfillment of the angel Gabriel's prophecy in Luke 1:26-38 that Mary would bear Jesus, the "son of the Most High [God]." Bach apparently composed his *Magnificat in E-flat*, a setting of the Latin text of Luke 1:46b-55 with appended Latin doxology, in his first months in Leipzig in 1723, possibly for the Feast of the Visitation (July 2), on which occasion this text is part of the day's gospel portion (Luke 1:39-56, chanted in German, as translated by Martin Luther). At the end of that year Bach composed four additional movements, settings of texts that in Leipzig were traditionally interpolated into the *Magnificat* at Christmas. There were thus two versions, one without Christmas interpolations and one with them, as Bach required a concerted Magnificat some sixteen times a year at the Sunday afternoon service. Both the non-Christmas and the Christmas versions of 1723 have now been assigned the single catalog number BWV 243.1. This dual version, notated in Eb major, was almost certainly designed to be performed in a combination of Eb major "tief Cammerton" ("low chamber pitch") that would match the high C major "Chorton" ("choir pitch") of the organ, tuned a minor third higher. In the early 1730s Bach revised only the non-interpolated movements of BWV 243.1, expanding and changing their instrumentation and notating this revised version in D major, possibly in connection with his plan to present sample works to the Dresden court. This new version, now assigned the number BWV 243.2, was almost certainly designed to be performed in D major "[normal] Cammerton" (a half-step higher than "tief Cammerton") to match the "Chorton" (tuned a major second higher than the normal Cammerton) of the organ, performing in C major. Although the earlier, dual score is (rightly) often referred to as the "Eb-major version of Bach's *Magnificat*" and the later score as the "D-major version of Bach's *Magnificat*," these different settings would apparently have sounded at the very same pitch level.

¹Luke 1:46b.

²In his musical setting of this passage Bach treats a standard, well-known Latin text as if it were in Luther's German translation. For the equivalent of "magnificat anima mea Dominum" ("my soul magnifies the Lord"), the Luther Bibles of Bach's day gave "meine Seele erhebt den Herrn" ("my soul exalts/extols the Lord"). This is not a difference of much import, unless a composer wants to engage in "word painting." For example, by commencing with a high, thin texture and moving to a much thicker, broader texture, the "Magnificat a 7" in Monteverdi's *Vespers* (1610) marvelously paints the sense of "magnifies" (from the post-classical Latin "magnificare," "to increase, enlarge"). By commencing with a full texture but having the main voices climb higher and higher, however, Bach's *Magnificat* paints the sense of "exalts" (from the Latin "exaltare," "to lift up") or "extols" (from the Latin "extollere," "to raise up"). Bach would have known perfectly well the specific sense of the Latin wording of Luke 1:46. But in setting the Latin text, he privileged the direct meaning of the German Bible over the direct meaning of the Latin Bible.

³A standard alternative spelling (ordinarily, "exultavit") employed by Bach in BWV 243.1 and in BWV 243.2.

⁴Luke 1:47.

A. Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her,
Ich bring euch gute neue Mär,
Der guten Mär bring ich so viel,
Davon ich singen und sagen will.⁵

A. There from heaven [on] high, I [God's angel]⁶
come here [to earth];
I bring you [shepherds]⁷ good, new tidings;⁸
Good tidings I bring so many
Of which I wish to sing and speak.

3.–4. *Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae, ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generationes.*⁹

3.–4. *For he has regarded the lowliness¹⁰ of his maidservant; for behold, from henceforth all generations will call me blessed.*

5. *Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est, et sanctum nomen eius.*¹¹

5. *For he who is mighty has done great [things] for me, and holy [is] his name.*

B. Freut euch und jubiliert,
Zu Bethlehem gefunden wird
Das herzeliebe Jesulein,
Das soll euer Freud und Wonne sein.¹²

B. Rejoice and exult;
In Bethlehem is to be found
The beloved little Jesus,
Who shall be your joy and bliss.

⁵The first stanza of this hymn.

⁶This “I” is “the angel-messenger of the Lord” who in Luke 2:8-12 announces the birth of Jesus.

⁷This “you” are “the shepherds” who receive the angel’s “good news/tidings” of Jesus’s birth in Luke 2:8-12.

⁸In modern German, “Mär” means “fairly tale” or “story.” In the older German of this hymn, however, (the grammatically singular) “Mär (whose plural, “Mären,” can be poetically clipped as “Märn” if a one-syllable plural were required) is a synonym for (the singular) “Botschaft” in the sense of “message,” for which, however, “tidings” (a plural construed as singular) is the best rendering in modern English. (Note that the next line of the hymn employs the singular “Mär” construed as plural.)

⁹Luke 1:48 (which has significant echoes of 1 Samuel 1:11). The traditional numbering of movements in Bach’s *Magnificat* has long regarded his setting of the words “omnes generationes” (“all generations”) as a distinct movement, convinced that the text beginning “Quia respexit” (deemed movement 3) is an aria-like solo and “omnes generationes” (deemed movement 4) a sort of crowd chorus meant to be performed at a much faster tempo. But both “Quia respexit” and “omnes generationes” are part of the same scriptural passage in a setting that allots one biblical verse to each musical movement, and Bach indicates no movement break (and no change in tempo) in either of the autograph scores that transmit versions of the work.

¹⁰For centuries, there has been considerable controversy over whether this passage refers to Mary’s personal attitude or to her social condition/status. The Latin “humilitatem,” like the English word “humility” (and the underlying Greek biblical term “tapeinosis”), can mean “the quality of having a lowly opinion of oneself; meekness, lowliness, humbleness,” or it can mean “low condition, rank, or estate.” Luther, who found the “attitude” interpretation of Luke 1:48 abhorrent (as it could suggest that Mary found favor in God’s eyes on account of her own “goodness” instead of—in Lutheran fashion—on her having been blessed with the unmerited gift of faith), rendered the verse variously as “Er hat die Elend/Niedrigkeit seiner Magd angesehen” (“He [God] has looked upon the wretchedness/low-estate of his maid [Mary of Nazareth]).

¹¹Luke 1:49.

¹²A Christmas text of anonymous authorship.

6. *Et misericordia a progenie in progenies timentibus eum.*¹³

6. *And [his]¹⁴ mercy [is] on those who fear him, from generation to generations.*¹⁵

7. *Fecit potentiam in brachio suo; dispersit superbos mente cordis sui.*¹⁶

7. *He has dealt might with his arm; he has scattered the arrogant in the imagination of their heart.*

C. *Gloria in excelsis Deo. Et in terra pax hominibus, bona voluntas.*¹⁷

C. *Glory to God on high [in heaven].¹⁸ And on earth peace to persons, [and] good will.*¹⁹

¹³Luke 1:50. The “Vulgate” (St. Jerome’s translation that became the official Latin Bible of the Roman Church) reads here “*Et misericordia eius a progenie in progenies timentibus eum*” (“And *his* mercy [is] on them who fear him, from generation to generations”).

¹⁴The implied “his” (Latin, “*eius*”) is employed explicitly in other musical settings of the Magnificat; see also fn. 13, above.

¹⁵In the single movement traditionally numbered “3.–4.” (for the single verse Luke 1:48; see fn. 9, above), the English word “generations” renders the plural of the Latin “*generatio*” in its sense of “all the people born and living at about the same time, regarded collectively,” but understood metaphorically as a temporal designation (of about thirty years). In older English, “progeny” still had this same temporal meaning as one of its senses; and also in ecclesiastical Latin, “progenies” could be used in this way, as a synonym for “*generatio*” (e.g., in the Vulgate of Exodus 34:7 and, here, in Luke 1:50). The best solution in modern English for rendering the Magnificat is simply to use “generation” again for the uses of “progenies” in movement 6, and it is worth noting that in the underlying Greek text the plural of “*genea*” (“generation,” in its temporal sense) is used all three times in Luke 1:48 and 1:50.

¹⁶Luke 1:51.

¹⁷A variant of Luke 2:14, words of the host of angels in the Nativity story. There is no punctuation in Bach’s own materials for this movement, but “*Et*” is indeed written with an uppercase “*e*” there, and the “*Et in terra pax hominibus*” is set off musically from “*Gloria in excelsis Deo*” and from “*bona voluntas.*” On the details and apparent significance of this variant wording, see fn. 19, below.

¹⁸“*Gloria in excelsis Deo*” (“Glory to God *on high* [in heaven]”), as understood in ecclesiastical Latin, can also be rendered “Glory to God *in the highest* [of the heavens].” “*In excelsis*” is the wording of the Old Latin Bibles in Luke 2:14, which was retained in liturgical uses even after the Vulgate in Luke 2:14 gave the phrase as “*Gloria in altissimis Deo*” (“Glory to God *in the highest*”). English translations of the Old Latin “*Gloria*” (which is the standard text of the “*Gloria*” in the Ordinary of the Mass) generally do render the text with the superlative, “Glory to God in the highest.” The Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, however, render the beginning of Luke 2:14 as “*Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe*” (“May honor be to God *on high*”).

¹⁹“*Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*” (“And on earth peace to persons of good will”) is the Vulgate’s rendering of Luke 2:14. As noted in fn. 17, above, Bach’s *Magnificat* uses not (the genitive) “*bonae voluntatis*” but (the nominative) “*bona voluntas.*” The underlying original Greek wording of Luke 2:14 has been strongly contested for centuries. The particular Greek source text that Luther used for translating the New Testament gave the term “*eudokia*” (“good will,” “pleasure,” or “favor”) in the nominative case, whereas the best ancient manuscripts have it in the genitive, “*eudokias.*” The Vulgate, going with the genitive, famously rendered the disputed passage with “*hominibus bonae voluntatis,*” but to Luther, this reading, “[let there be] peace on earth *to persons of good will*” (i.e., rather than “[let there be] peace on earth, [and let there also be God’s] *good will toward persons*”), too easily suggested that God’s mercy and grace could be merited, directly contradicting a central tenet of his theology. Luther thus rendered Luke’s verse as “*Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe und Friede auf Erden und den Menschen ein Wohlgefallen*” (“May honor be to God on high, and [may there be] peace on earth, and [may there also be (God’s)] *great favor toward persons*”). Luther’s choice to translate the nominative reading—not to mention his insertion of the word “and”—made it possible to more readily understand the gospel passage in a way that he believed more clearly promotes a theology of “unmerited grace.”

8. *Deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles.*²⁰

8. *He has put down the mighty from their seat, and lifted up the lowly.*²¹

9. *Esurientes implevit bonis, et divites dimisit inanes.*²²

9. *He has filled the hungry with good [things], and the rich he has sent away empty.*

D. Virga Jesse floruit,
Emanuel noster apparuit;
Induit carnem hominus,
Fit puer delectabilis. Alleluia.²³

D. The “rod of Jesse” [God’s messiah] has blossomed,²⁴
Our Immanuel [“God-with-us”] has appeared;
He [God] has [in Jesus] put on human flesh,
He has been created a delightful child.²⁵ Hallelujah.

10. *Suscepit Israel puerum suum, recordatus misericordiae suae.*²⁶

10. *He has taken up*²⁷ *his child/servant*²⁸ *Israel, mindful of his mercy;*

11. *Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros, Abraham et semini eius in saecula.*²⁹

11. *As he has spoken to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.*³⁰

²⁰Luke 1:52 (which has significant echoes of 1 Samuel 1:11).

²¹On the personal-attitude versus social senses in the meanings of “humility,” see fn. 10, above. Luther, going explicitly with the term’s social sense, rendered this verse, Luke 1:52, variously as “Er stösst die Gewaltigen vom Stuhl und erhebt die Elenden/Niedrigen” (“He [God] casts the powerful from their throne and lifts up the wretched/lowly”).

²²Luke 1:53.

²³A Christmas text of anonymous authorship.

²⁴The “virga” here is the “rod” spoken of in Isaiah 11:1, a key passage of messianic prophecy. The Vulgate of Isaiah 11:1 reads “Et egredietur virga de radice Iesse, et flos de radice eius ascendet” (“And a rod will go forth from the root of Jesse [the father of King David of Israel, from whose lineage Jesus is reported to come, in Luke 3:23-28 and Matthew 1:2-17], and a flower will ascend from his root”); Isaiah 11:1 in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads, however, “Es wird eine Rute aufgehen von dem Stamm Isai, und ein Zweig aus seiner Wurzel Frucht bringen” (“A rod will go up from the stem of Jesse, and a branch out of his root will yield fruit”).

²⁵Concerning the word “puer,” see also fn. 28, below; the “puer” Jesus who is a “child” will also become a “puer” in the sense of a “servant.”

²⁶Luke 1:54.

²⁷The general sense of the verb “suscipio” was “to take or catch up, to take upon one, to support, hold up, sustain”; the verb was also employed, e.g., in the situation of a father “taking up” his new-born child to formally acknowledge it.

²⁸The Latin “puer” (like the biblically underlying Greek word “pais”) can mean “boy/child” or “servant/slave.” Luther renders this passage, Luke 1:54, with “Diener” (“attendant/servant”). In Isaiah 41:8 and elsewhere in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), the term “pais” is used for the Hebrew term “ebed” (“servant”) that is applied to Jacob/Israel; and in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, Isaiah 41:8 reads “Du aber, Israel, mein Knecht, Jakob, den ich erwählt habe” (“But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen”).

²⁹Luke 1:55.

³⁰A literal rendering of “in saecula” is “into generations.”

12. Gloria Patri; Gloria Filio; Gloria et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.³¹

12. Glory to [God] the Father; glory to the Son; glory also to the Holy Spirit. As it³² was in the beginning, and [is] now, and always, and forever and ever.³³ Amen.

(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)



Scan or go to <http://www.bachcantatatexts.org/BWV243.1B> for an annotated translation

³¹This movement is a setting of the “Lesser Doxology,” a postbiblical hymn of praise that was traditionally added to psalms and to other biblical poems (such as the Magnificat) when used liturgically, to make their acclamation of the universal God of Israel explicitly Trinitarian.

³²The phrase “As it was in the beginning” was a later (Latin) insertion to the run of the original (Greek) text of the Lesser Doxology (see fn. 31, above). The antecedent of “it” here is now often taken to be “glory” but appears originally to have been meant to be “the Son” (i.e., pointing to the existence of the Son/Word of God, “in the ‘beginning’ [i.e., qualitatively/eternally, ‘before’ the Creation],” as is understood to be proclaimed of God’s messiah, Jesus, “the Word made flesh,” in the Gospel of John).

³³A literal rendering of “in saecula saeculorum” is “into generations of generations.”