



JOHANN
SEBASTIAN
BACH'S
*Christmas
Oratorio*



*Music,
Theology,
Culture*

MARKUS RATHEY

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rathey, Markus.

Title: Johann Sebastian Bach's Christmas Oratorio : music, theology, culture / Markus Rathey.

Description: New York : Oxford University Press, [2016] | Includes
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015049008 (print) | LCCN 2015049271 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780190275259 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780190275266 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Bach, Johann Sebastian, 1685–1750. Weihnachts-Oratorium.

Classification: LCC ML410.B13 R287 2016 (print) | LCC ML410.B13 (ebook) | DDC
782.23—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015049008>

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

Tell me where is fancy bred/Or in the heart, or in the head?

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, III, 2

Perché s'è ver, che nel tuo cor io sia,

Entro al tuo sen celata,

Non posso da' tuoi lumi esser mirata.

Claudio Monteverdi, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, I, 3

*God's love and grace are not just mathematical or mechanical relations,
but have their true seat and origin in the movement of the heart of God.*

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II*, 1, 370

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

A Note on Translations xi

Abbreviations xiii

1. Prologue 1
2. Redefining Christmas 13
3. Layers of Time: The Theology of the *Christmas Oratorio* 50
4. Bach's Oratorio Concept 85
5. Planning the Oratorio 110
6. Dichotomies (Part I) 144
7. Mundane and Celestial Harmonies (Part II) 191
8. Inward Mobility (Part III) 239
9. "What's in a Name?" (Part IV) 271
10. Paths of Enlightenment (Part V) 306

11. The Bridegroom and the Enemy (Part VI) 349

12. Looking Ahead: An Epilogue 380

Bibliography 391

Index 409

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first words of thanks go to my graduate students who have, in several seminars, discussed Bach and his vocal music, the interpretation of Bach sources, the history of the oratorio in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the religious and devotional landscape in Germany in the eighteenth century. I have learned a lot from the keen eyes of music theorists, conductors, singers, music historians, and theologians. The unique mixture of talents and interests at Yale has left its mark on the multifaceted approach to Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* and is reflected in this book.

I would also like to thank my colleagues at Yale, the School of Music, the Department of Music, the Divinity School, and in particular my colleagues and friends at the Institute of Sacred Music for their encouragement and the valuable advice. It has been inspiring for me as a scholar to prepare performances of Bach's works with my colleagues Marguerite Brooks, Simon Carrington, David Hill, and Masaaki Suzuki. Having one of my favorite Bach-tenors, James Taylor, as a friend and colleague also provided inspiration. His warm voice on the Rilling recording of the oratorio from 2000 accompanied me through the process of writing this book. My colleague Ellen Rosand's book on Monteverdi's *Venetian Trilogy* (2007) encouraged me to bridge the gulf between philology and semantics, between details of the compositional process and the religious and dramatic function of the music.

A large number of friends and colleagues were kind enough to read all or parts of the manuscript at various stages of its development: Danielle Annett, Eric Chafe, Ellen Exner, Bruce Gordon, and Robin Leaver. My thanks go especially to Michael Marissen, who meticulously read the final draft and made numerous suggestions that improved both the style as well as the content of the book. Other colleagues who have lent me their ears and their advice during the genesis of the book were Stephen Crist, Don Franklin, Andreas Glöckner, Michael Maul, Daniel Melamed, Mark Peters, and Thomas Troeger.

Some of my current and former students have aided me in my research: Kathryn Aaron, Blenda Bo Kyung Im, Katharine Arnold Luce; my research assistant, Emily Coakley, meticulously edited the manuscript.

I am grateful to a large number of libraries and archives that provided me access to their holdings and which have patiently responded to my requests for copies, scans, and bibliographic information: the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek Berlin (esp. the Musikabteilung), the Bach Archive Leipzig, the Riemenschneider Bach Institute at Baldwin-Wallace University, the Bibliotheca Albertina Leipzig, the Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, the Universitäts- und Forschungsbibliothek Erfurt/Gotha, the Sächsische Landesbibliothek Dresden, and especially the libraries at Yale: the Beinecke Library, the Music Library, and the library of the Divinity School.

The research for this book would not have been possible without the financial support of several institutions. First and foremost I have to thank again the Yale Institute of Sacred Music for institutional and financial support, and for granting me a sabbatical in 2012, which allowed me to examine Bach's composition score for the *Christmas Oratorio* and other Bach sources in the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek Berlin. The research in Berlin was also supported through a Scheide Research Grant by the American Bach Society. The Martha Goldsworthy Fellowship by the Riemenschneider Bach Institute allowed me to spend several weeks in Berea, Ohio, and to take advantage of the holdings of the institute. I am grateful to the former director Mel Unger as well as the librarian Sandra Eichenberg.

Suzanne Ryan, Daniel Gibney, and Andrew Maillet at Oxford University Press have supported me in this project and have overseen a smooth and efficient production process. I am grateful for their encouragement and their patience during the final stages of the completion of the book. Mary Sutherland copyedited the manuscript, using her editorial skill to improve it in ways too numerous to count.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my late father, Karl-Heinz Rathey (1934–85) and to my mother, who has supported me on every step of my academic career.

Markus Rathey
New Haven, November 2015

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

The translations of the texts for Bach's oratorios are based on Michael Marissen, *Bach's Oratorios: The Parallel German-English Texts with Annotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Translations of texts from Bach's cantatas follow Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, trans. Richard D. P. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). All other translations (especially of theological texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) are mine unless stated otherwise.

ABBREVIATIONS

The capitalization of pitches and keys uses italics for individual pitches (*c–d–e*) and roman type for key areas and chords (C–D–E). Chords (both major and minor) are capitalized whereas pitches appear in lower-case letters (with indication of octaves, like in *c'*); only pitches in the lower octave (C–D–B) are capitalized.

Names of biblical books are spelled out in full (Matthew 1:2–3) when cited in running text; cited in parentheses are the abbreviated forms (Mt 1:2–3):

Chr	Chronicles
Eph	Ephesians
Gal	Galatians
Gen	Genesis
Isa	Isaiah
Jas	James
Jn	John
Lk	Luke
Mk	Mark
Mt	Matthew
Ps (Pss)	Psalm (Psalms)
Sam	Samuel

BachDok *Bach-Dokumente*. Leipzig and Kassel, 1963–72. Complete critical edition of the source material on Bach, with extensive commentaries. Edited under the auspices of the Bach-Archiv Leipzig as a supplement to the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*.

bc basso continuo.

BuxWV Buxtehude-Werke-Verzeichnis: Georg Karstädt. *Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis der musikalischen Werke von Dietrich Buxtehude*, Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1974.

- BWV *Bach Werke-Verzeichnis*, Wolfgang Schmieder. Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis der musikalischen Werke Johann Sebastian Bachs, Leipzig, 1950. Rev. ed. Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1990.
- BWV *Bach Werke-Verzeichnis: Kleine Ausgabe*. Edited by Alfred Dürr and Yoshitake Kobayashi, Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1998.
- H Helm Catalogue: E. Eugene Helm. *Thematic Catalogue of the Works of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989.
- MGG *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Allgemeine Enzyklopaedie der Musik*. Edited by Friedrich Blume. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1949f.
- NBA I, II /KB *Neue Bach-Ausgabe: Kritischer Bericht* (critical commentary).
- NBA *Neue Bach-Ausgabe. Johann Sebastian Bach Complete Works*. Edited under the auspices of the Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Institute Göttingen and the Bach-Archiv Leipzig, Kassel and Leipzig, 1954f.
- P 32 Abbreviated call number for Bach's autograph score of the Christmas Oratorio in Deutsche Staatsbibliothek Berlin (complete call number: Mus. ms. Bach P 32).
- Rit Ritornello.
- TVWV *Telemann Vokal Werke Verzeichnis*: Martin Ruhnke. *Georg Philipp Telemann: Thematisches Verzeichnis der Vokalwerke von Georg Philipp Telemann*. Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983.
- TWV *Telemann Werke Verzeichnis*: Werner Menke. *Thematisch-Systematisches Verzeichnis seiner Werke*. Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1984–1999.

Johann Sebastian Bach's
Christmas Oratorio

Prologue

At the bottom of the score for movement 38 in part IV of the *Christmas Oratorio*, hidden in the lower right-hand corner of the page, a keen observer will discover a small drawing by Johann Sebastian Bach. The drawing shows a little heart, with the symbol replacing the German word for “heart” in the text “mein Jesus labet Herz und Brust” (my Jesus refreshes heart and breast) (fig. 1.1). Why would Bach draw a symbol of a heart rather than write the text? It is easy to give a pragmatic explanation for this: Bach simply ran out of room at the end of the page, and the symbol occupied less space in the score than the complete word would have done. A few pages later, in the aria “Ich will nur dir zu Ehren leben” (no. 41), Bach does the same thing. In mm. 19 and 32, the word “Herz” is once more replaced with a heart; and again, space constraints appear to be the primary reason. However, pragmatism alone underestimates the significance of the symbol for eighteenth-century devotion and piety. The composer could easily have abbreviated the word with the initial “H.” His copyists, who prepared the performance parts, had access to the libretto and could have inserted the correct word. Instead, Bach repeatedly uses a symbol that is ubiquitous in devotional literature and iconography of his time, and were as omnipresent as symbols such as :-) and @ are in our age of digital communication.

While drawing the heart saved Bach needed space in the score, it is more than just a philological detail. For Bach or any other eighteenth-century beholder, the heart signified much more. The heart symbolized the intimate relationship between the believer and Jesus—the very same idea that is expressed in these movements from part IV of the oratorio. This unassuming little detail taken by itself is not much more than a music historical footnote, so unassuming, in fact, that it was not even mentioned in the critical commentary for the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*. Yet it directs our attention to the theological framework of the *Christmas Oratorio*, which will be explored in detail in chapter 3 of this book. The heart draws our attention to other aspects of the work as well, specifically the genesis of the oratorio itself and its compositional process. The conventional practice of composing recitatives among eighteenth-century

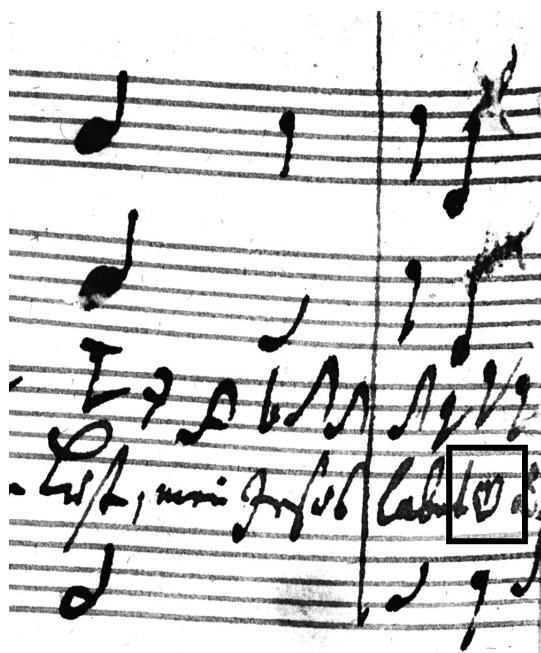


Figure 1.1 J. S. Bach, BWV 248/38, autograph score (D-B Mus. ms. Bach P 32, fol. 35^v) (bpk, Berlin/Mendelssohn-Archiv, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany/Art Resource, NY)

composers like Handel, Hasse, and Bach was to copy the text first and then turn to the composition of the music. This second step was sometimes postponed until a later point in the compositional process after the more demanding movements like arias and choruses had been written. The unevenly spaced handwriting as well as the drawing of the heart in mvt. 38 suggests that the order of events was different in this particular case. It appears that Bach wrote the text *after* the music had already been written. Consequently, words sometimes spill over bar lines or, as in the case of “Herz,” do not fit at all. The reason for Bach’s unorthodox procedure is the unusual character of the movement. Not only is it an *accompagnato* recitative, but in the second half of the movement the bass is joined in a duet by the soprano who is singing a chorale text. Consequently, the music could not simply follow the text as in a regular recitative; here, Bach had to deal with the composition of the music first. The analysis of this movement in chapter 9 will show how Bach employs a gendered use of voices (soprano and bass) and parallel movements in thirds and sixths to create the impression of a love-duet that musically captures the erotic imagery of the text, and which directly correlates to the use of the little heart.

Bach’s autograph score of the *Christmas Oratorio* grants us insight into the compositional process, which in turn will bring into focus important aspects of the

music and its relationship with the text. In the second instance of the heart, in the tenor aria mvt. 41 (“Ich will nur dir zu Ehren leben”), the compositional process was different than that in no. 38 but equally interesting. The music was originally composed for the secular cantata *Laßt uns sorgen, laßt uns wachen*, BWV 213. For its use in part IV of the oratorio, Bach’s librettist wrote a new text that fit the music. Accordingly, Bach copied the entire movement first and then inserted the text, common procedure in parodies like this. The text-underlay could be challenging if the new text required more space than the music provided, as in the present case. But again, he could have solved the problem differently; instead, he deliberately chose to draw the heart.

Bach’s use of the heart symbol challenges us to explore two seemingly disparate sides of the oratorio simultaneously: the theological profile of the piece as well as the philological study of the manuscript source. The polarity and interconnectedness between theology and philology captures the two main foci of this book. This study of Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* explores the genesis of the piece and analyzes the music while paying particular attention to traces of the compositional process, like corrections and revisions and the use of older material in parodies. In several instances, Bach’s changes and corrections illuminate his final solutions for compositional problems and help us better understand his musical goals. The paths not taken also help us understand and appreciate the paths he eventually did take. The composition score for the *Christmas Oratorio* serves as a tool that allows us to reconstruct some of the thought processes that led to the final work. We encounter numerous cases in which the changes made during the compositional process highlight certain aspects of the text by emphasizing a word or by heightening the emotive quality of the libretto. In these cases, philology and theology stand in direct conversation with one another. In other instances, though, they simply coexist. Not every compositional revision serves the text and its meaning. Rather, some changes have the purpose of simply increasing the beauty or the syntactic coherence of the music.

This book locates Bach’s oratorio not only within his own oeuvre but also in the cultural and religious climate of eighteenth-century Germany. The libretto for the oratorio often echoes common themes, phrases, or motifs from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Other authors of church music texts employed similar ideas, but these poets are often forgotten because their texts were either not set to music or composed by those who exist in the shadows of our musical canon. To name but one example of a composer who wrote Christmas cantatas contemporary with Bach—Johann Balthasar Christian Freißlich (1687–1764)—and who today is familiar with his cantatas? The same is true for the large number of sermons from Bach’s time. Including these texts in our discussion demonstrates a repertory of common ideas, motifs, and allusions that resonated with the librettist while he drafted the text for the *Christmas Oratorio*, with Bach when he composed the

music, and among the listeners when they first heard the piece in Leipzig during the Christmas season 1734/35.

Let us return again to heart drawn into mvmt. 38: the heart as a dwelling place of Christ features prominently in countless hymns, sermons, devotional books, and religious images from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Bach's listeners would not have seen the little symbol in the score, but they would have understood and appreciated its significance as much as they would have been aware of the centrality of this heart-imagery throughout the oratorio. But it is also important to emphasize that music and text do not always convey the same thing. It would be misleading to interpret every detail in Bach's music theologically. Instead, music and theology have to be understood as two separate (yet interconnected) discourses, each following their own paradigms, traditions, and rules. Both have their strengths and weaknesses, capabilities and limitations. The discourses are independent but they also intersect. If music is paired with a religious text, it necessarily and automatically participates in a theological discourse as well. Every decision a composer makes, to highlight certain words or to de-emphasize others, is a statement about the meaning of the text. This statement might seem superficial, but it still reflects and generates a particular understanding of the words. This exegesis exists and is shaped by the cultural environment in which both the music and the words were created. For religious music such as Bach's oratorio, this environment is reflected in theological treatises, hymns, devotional literature, and sermons. Referring to these sources in an interpretation of Bach's music does not imply that he necessarily was familiar with all these texts, but they are a window into the religious culture of his time. The composer probably did not study a theological treatise on the Gospel of Luke before he embarked on setting the Christmas story from Luke 2, yet theological and devotional texts help reconstruct a framework of understanding in which the composer worked and his audience perceived the piece. Musical and theological discourses also intersect on a higher level of meta-discourses, like the perception of reality, of time, and of the divine. These conversations are connected since they unfurled at the same time and at the same place: Leipzig, 1734. They are shaped by the same *Zeitgeist*.¹ Accordingly, these theological and philosophical sources provide a framework in which we are able to analyze the libretto as well as Bach's treatment of the text.

One important detail is missing from this framework. The identity of the author of the libretto is still unknown. Christian Friedrich Henrici (1700–1764), known by his pen name Picander, has often been suggested as the possible author for the libretto of BWV 248. Bach and Picander had collaborated since 1725, and by the

¹ A word coined by Johann Gottfried Herder in 1769, two years before he began to collaborate with Johann Sebastian Bach's son Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach in Bückeburg. This is merely a historical coincidence but demonstrates how historical lines sometimes intersect.

early 1730s he was Bach's main librettist. What is unusual, however, is that the libretto was not reprinted in one of Picander's collections with poetry, as is the case with most of the other texts he had written for Bach. While this might speak against him as being the librettist, there are also no internal reasons (theological or poetical) that would rule out his collaboration. We will return briefly to this question in chapter 3 of this book.

While the *Christmas Oratorio* is one of the most frequently performed works by Bach, it has not received much attention by scholars, particularly in the English-speaking world. The only monographic treatment of BWV 248 is Ignace Bossuyt's overview from 2004, which was translated from Dutch.² Other books appeared only in German. The two main reasons for this lack of interest are the seemingly simple character of the work and the extensive use of parodies, which seemed to render it esthetically less valuable than the Passions, for instance. In fact, the editor of the *Christmas Oratorio* for the *Bach-Gesellschaft*, Wilhelm Rust, deemed it necessary to defend the piece against possible accusations of esthetic inferiority, due to the inclusion of previously composed material. His argument rests on the assumption that Bach had always intended the parodied movements for the oratorio. In other words, the secular cantatas, in which they appeared first, were only their temporary home (and thus deemed esthetically inferior), while the oratorio was their intended place.³ The parody problem ("Parodieproblem") has been discussed repeatedly by scholars and commentators. While it is obvious that composers in the eighteenth century did not view the parody technique as esthetically problematic, as soon as the *Christmas Oratorio* was viewed as a part of the canon of Western music, it was then measured against the postulate of originality applied to Beethoven's symphonies, Schubert's songs, and Wagner's operas. The most significant contribution to this question has been made by Ludwig Finscher in an essay from 1969, in which he not only analyzed the technical procedures Bach applied in his parodies but also attributed an esthetic surplus ("ästhetischer Überschuss") to Bach's music. This surfeit transcends the plain relationship between specific texts and music, as well as composition and original function.⁴ Accordingly, this book traces Bach's use of parodies in the *Christmas Oratorio* and shows how Bach meticulously plans the use of previously composed material within the work. Bach revises the existing music to fit the new text and he also improves minute details that are independent from the words of the libretto. These revisions are often little different from revisions he would make in newly composed arias and choral movements,

² Ignace Bossuyt, *Johann Sebastian Bach, Christmas oratorio (BWV 248)*, trans. Stratton Bull (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004). The book was originally published in Dutch in 2002 and appeared in an English translation two years later.

³ Wilhelm Rust, foreword to *Bach-Gesellschaft Edition* (1856), viii.

⁴ Ludwig Finscher, "Zum Parodieproblem bei Bach," in *Bach-Interpretationen*, ed. Martin Geck, FS Walter Blankenburg zum 65. Geburtstag (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1969), 94–105.

which make the use of parodies firmly integrated into the compositional process of this oratorio. It is ironic that the *B-Minor Mass*, held in highest esteem by scholars and listeners alike, is even to a larger degree based on parodies. However, the transformation of the musical material in the Mass is more substantive than that seen in the oratorio. Furthermore, the *B-Minor Mass* had already acquired the status of a model composition in the early nineteenth century before critics became aware of the parody relationships.

Much of the work in this book is indebted to contributions by earlier generations of Bach scholars, particularly since the 1950s. The beginning of the second half of the twentieth century saw a quantum leap for Bach studies. The publication of Schmieder's *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis* (BWV) in 1950 provided a reliable catalogue of Bach's works—and a universal numbering system that is still in place today. The start of the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* (NBA) in 1954, replacing the *Bach-Gesellschaft Ausgabe* from the nineteenth century, not only helped create new editions that reflected the most advanced state of philological scholarship but also necessitated a new assessment of the sources. This in turn led to the “new chronology.” Alfred Dürr's and Georg von Dadelsen's research has revolutionized our knowledge of the chronology and genesis of Bach's Leipzig vocal works. The authors showed that the cantatas were, for the most part, a product of his earlier years in Leipzig and not (as hitherto assumed) the fruit of his more mature years. While the *Christmas Oratorio* was not directly affected by the new chronology (the autograph score is dated in Bach's own hand and its chronology had never been in doubt), it does nuance the contextual understanding of the piece. It is now clear that Bach had turned to the genre of oratorio at a time when his production of cantatas had ebbed. Sacred compositions in the 1730s were an exception for Bach, not the norm any more.

The edition of the oratorio for the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* was prepared collaboratively by Alfred Dürr and Walter Blankenburg—the former a leading expert of Bach philology of his time, and the latter a musicologist with a keen interest in hymnology and theology. Their different perspectives are reflected in two important and influential books on the oratorio, which are still considered cornerstones of modern scholarship on Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*. Dürr's small study from 1967 focuses almost entirely on the music: the description of the sources, the technical aspects of the parody process, and Bach's use of musical genres.⁵ Blankenburg's book, published in 1982, gives a description of the music as well but focuses much more on the theological interpretation of Bach's composition.⁶ For the most part Blankenburg

⁵ Alfred Dürr, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Weihnachts-Oratorium, BWV 248*, Meisterwerke der Musik 8 (Munich: Fink, 1967).

⁶ Walter Blankenburg, *Das Weihnachts-Oratorium von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag/Bärenreiter, 1982).

does not consult theological texts from Bach's time, but instead he works under the implicit assumption that the music is charged with religious meaning and that this meaning can be decoded from a modern perspective. His perspective is that of a German Lutheran and thus relies primarily on Luther as a theological source. The approaches of both books are limited. Dürr disregards the cultural and religious context, while Blankenburg takes an anachronistic approach by using a sixteenth-century theologian and his twentieth-century reception as a Rosetta stone for the interpretation of an eighteenth-century composition.

Noteworthy is Günter Jena's book *Brich an, o schönes Morgenlicht* (1997).⁷ Written not by a scholar but by a performer, it addresses a general audience and adds some very perceptive observations about the architecture of Bach's music and about the ways he manipulates his musical material. The most recent comprehensive discussion of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* to date is Meinrad Walter's book from 2006.⁸ Like Blankenburg, Walter is mostly interested in the oratorio as a work of religious expression. What differentiates him from his predecessor are a broader knowledge of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theology and a number of short excursions into Bach's workshop ("Blick in die Werkstatt"), which highlight significant details of Bach's compositional process and of his handwriting. An exclusive treatment of the theological aspects of the oratorio from a historical perspective is Martin Petzoldt's *Bach Kommentar*, which contains commentary on each of the six parts of the *Christmas Oratorio*.⁹ Petzoldt provides the first systematic discussion of the theology of the piece. In spite of some methodological shortcomings and a rather narrow source base, Petzoldt's commentary is still an important resource for further scholarship.

Outside of these monographic treatments, the *Christmas Oratorio* has only occasionally received the attention of scholars. Important contributions that have shaped our understanding of the piece are the studies of Bach's parody technique by Werner Neumann (1965) and Ludwig Finscher (1969);¹⁰ Andreas Glöckner's considerations of a model for the last part of the oratorio (2000);¹¹ and two important

⁷ Günter Jena, *Brich an, o schönes Morgenlicht: Das Weihnachtsoratorium von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Freiburg, Herder: 1999).

⁸ Meinrad Walter, *Johann Sebastian Bach—Weihnachtsoratorium* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2006).

⁹ Martin Petzoldt, *Bach-Kommentar II: Die geistlichen Kantaten vom 1. Advent bis zum Trinitatisfest*, Schriftenreihe Internationale Bachakademie 14, 2 (Stuttgart/Kassel: Internationale Bachakademie/Bärenreiter, 2007). While not an independent monograph, the sections on the oratorio comprise ninety-five pages.

¹⁰ Werner Neumann, "Über Ausmaß und Wesen des Bachschen Parodieverfahrens," *Bach-Jahrbuch* 51 (1965): 63–85; Finscher, "Zum Parodieproblem bei Bach," 94–105.

¹¹ Andreas Glöckner, "Eine Michaeliskantate als Parodievorlage für den sechsten Teil des Bachschen Weihnachts-Oratoriums?," *Bach-Jahrbuch* 86 (2000): 317–26.

articles by the theologian Ernst Koch about the function of the echo aria in part IV (1989) and the significance of the alto voice in the oratorio (1995).¹² Koch replaces Blankenburg's intuitive approach with a more careful evaluation of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources. Finally, Christoph Wolff outlines, in a recent article, the ramifications of Bach's oratorio concept, which views the three oratorios for the major feast days (Christmas, Easter, Ascension) as part of a larger, unified oratorio project.¹³ Chapter 4 of this book summarizes Wolff's observations and adds some details to his analysis.

The celebration of Christmas as we know it today was born in the nineteenth century. The idea of a family feast that revolved around consumerism and, at the same time, struggled with it developed in the early decades of the nineteenth century and took shape over the following decades. Scholars such as Stephen Nissenbaum, Joe Perry, and Susan K. Roll have analyzed the emergence of the modern feast.¹⁴ A study of the understanding of the feast in Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* therefore has to go back before the Romantic period. The following two chapters demonstrate that Bach himself lived during a time of change. When he was born in 1685, Christmas traditions still retained some of their medieval roots: carnivalesque rituals and misrule were still frequent in the streets of Lutheran cities in Germany toward the latter half of the seventeenth century. Both theologians and secular authorities strove to abolish these traditions. This "war on Christmas" coincided with a general trend of internalizing religiosity. Physical and bodily religious practices (like the Christmas plays we discuss in chapter 2) gave way to an interior spirituality. Christmas became a feast that was no longer celebrated in the streets but was instead contemplated in the human heart. What remained in devotional texts about Christmas were metaphors—like love, marriage, and the heart—which had physical roots but were now confined to the realm of language and symbol. The rocking of a real cradle, once a popular practice in the Christmas rituals all over Europe, was transformed into the image of Jesus inhabiting the cradle of the human heart. Most of these images were much older and rooted in medieval mysticism and Lutheran theology; around 1700, though, these metaphors acquired a new

¹² Ernst Koch, "Tröstendes Echo: Zur theologischen Deutung der Echo-Arie im IV. Teil des Weihnachts-Oratoriums von Johann Sebastian Bach," *Bach-Jahrbuch* 75 (1989): 203–11, and "Die Stimme des Heiligen Geistes: Theologische Hintergründe der solistischen Altpartien in der Kirchenmusik Johann Sebastian Bachs," *Bach-Jahrbuch* 81 (1995): 61–81.

¹³ Christoph Wolff, "Under the Spell of Opera? Bach's Oratorio Trilogy," in *J. S. Bach and the Oratorio Tradition*, ed. Daniel R. Melamed, *Bach Perspectives* 8 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 1–12.

¹⁴ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Vintage, 1996); Joe Perry, *Christmas in Germany. A Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995).

function as they replaced external and physical practices. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* participates in this internalization of religiosity. Chapter 3 outlines this theological understanding of the Christmas feast in Bach's time, and it demonstrates how this theological understanding of Christmas influenced both the libretto as well as the structural framework of Bach's composition. A tripartite temporal framework (past, present, and future)—which is employed by theological treatises—also shapes the ground plan of Bach's oratorio.

In his outline for a sermon preached on Christmas Day 1733, the Leipzig superintendent Salomon Deyling succinctly captured the understanding of Christmas in Leipzig around the time of Bach's composition of the oratorio. It is likely that Bach (and maybe even his librettist) heard the sermon, which occurred exactly one year before the congregation witnessed part I of the oratorio. But even if they had not, Deyling poetically summarizes a conventional view of the feast, which Bach would have encountered throughout his life:

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>1. Die Glaubens-Lehre: GOtt wird ein Mensch, und kommt zu uns auf Erden. Nun können wir gerecht und GOttes Kinder werden.</p> <p>2. Die Lebens-Pflicht: Dein Heiland kömmt zu dir, ist auch dein Hertze rein? Wo Sünd und Unflath ist, will er nicht kehren ein.</p> <p>3. Der Glauben-Trost: GOtt ist mit uns versöhnt. Drum weichet Traurigkeit. Es freu sich jedermann, dem seine Sünd ist leid.¹⁵</p> | <p>1. The doctrine of faith: God becomes man and comes to us on earth. Now we can become justified and God's children.</p> <p>2. The duty in life: Your Savior comes to you, is your heart pure? Where there are sin and misbehavior, he will not enter.</p> <p>3. The consolation of faith: God is reconciled with us. Thus, sadness retreats. Everybody who regrets their sin shall be joyful.</p> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Here, we understand that Christ comes as a child to make mankind children of God. He dwells in the human heart and grants consolation in times of sadness. Chapter 3 explores in more detail these theological ideas and how they were woven into the libretto for the oratorio.

While chapters 2 and 3 provide the cultural and religious context for the oratorio, chapters 4 and 5 will deal with practical issues. As Christoph Wolff has recently shown, Bach worked on a larger oratorio project during the 1730s, which included pieces for Christmas, Easter, Ascension, the revision of the *St. John* and *St. Matthew Passions*, and possibly plans for a Pentecost oratorio as well.¹⁶ Chapter 4 considers

¹⁵ Salomon Deyling, *Herrliche Dinge in der Stadt Gottes geprediget* (Leipzig, 1734), 5.

¹⁶ Wolff, "Under the Spell of Opera?," 1–12.

the reasons for Bach's sudden interest in this genre in 1734, and it demonstrates how his own understanding of the genre shaped the peculiar profile of BWV 248. Chapter 5 then delves into more detail by reconstructing the compositional process from the earliest planning stages, the inclusion of parody movements, the order of composition of individual movements within the oratorio, the shaping of musical ideas, and the revision of both smaller and larger details in the music. The work in that chapter would not have been possible without the magisterial study of Bach's compositional process by Robert Marshall (1972).¹⁷ Chapter 5 applies Marshall's general observations to the *Christmas Oratorio* and adds further details to the picture.

The following six chapters deal with each of the six parts of the oratorio individually. Instead of simply proceeding movement by movement, like most of the previous monographs on the oratorio, each chapter focuses on one crucial aspect and analyzes its realization in text and music. Part I of the oratorio explores a set of dichotomies, most of which are already alluded to in Deyling's sermon outline quoted earlier: God and man, heaven and earth, sin and salvation, rich and poor, as well as concepts of time and social status. The first part also introduces the love imagery that dominates the entire oratorio: bride and bridegroom, the beloved, and the heart as the dwelling place of the divine. The three parody movements in part I, the opening chorus and the two arias, provide case studies for Bach's parody technique in the oratorio as a whole.

The second part of the oratorio, which culminates in the angelic hymn "Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe" (May honor be to God on high) can be read and heard as an essay on the meaning of music and sound. Music as a means of communication between earthly and heavenly realms is already present in the harmonious dialogue between angelic and pastoral choruses in the opening *sinfonia*, and later movements in part II of the oratorio return to this subject repeatedly. This view of music—again deeply rooted in the theology of Bach's time—has ramifications beyond part II as it demonstrates how sound and harmony can aid in the unification of God and men.

This unification, the *unio mystica*, metaphorically taking place in the human heart, as point 2 in Deyling's sermon suggests, is the focus of part III of the oratorio. The physical (external) movement of the shepherds toward the manger is reinterpreted as the spiritual (internal) movement of God toward man. This deliberate embodiment of an external act correlates with the internalization and spiritualization of Christmas during Bach's lifetime. The musical and theological center of part III is the alto aria "Schließe, mein Herze" (no. 31). It is also the only newly composed

¹⁷ Robert Lewis Marshall, *The Compositional Process of J. S. Bach: A Study of the Autograph Scores of the Vocal Works*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

aria in the entire oratorio. Bach's careful work on this particular movement and the numerous changes and revisions reflect its importance within the context of the entire oratorio. As chapter 3 shows, this aria is the turning point in the temporal as well as the structural framework of the *Christmas Oratorio*.

Part IV of the oratorio is an extensive meditation on the meaning of the name of Jesus as the essence of his divine and human nature. The two movements, mentioned at the beginning of this prologue, in which Bach drew a heart instead of writing out the word, appear in this part of the oratorio. The contemplation of the divine name is intrinsically intertwined with the mystical unity symbolized by the heart in eighteenth-century devotional writing. Musical and theological questions also intersect in the famous echo-aria of part IV.

The last two parts of the *Christmas Oratorio* tell the story of the three wise men and their journey to the manger in Bethlehem. As the star is the guide to the newborn child, part V explores the metaphors of light and darkness: light or "enlightenment" becomes a metaphor for the clearer knowledge and understanding of God and God's will. The opening movement for part V is the only large-scale choral movement that was not based on a parody, and this provides another opportunity to study Bach's compositional process in more depth. The final part of the oratorio returns to the juxtaposition of earlier parts, pitting the bridegroom Christ against his adversaries: namely, King Herod, but by extension all such enemies as Satan, death, and sin. This part is characterized in particular by its eschatological outlook, directing one's view from the past (Christ's birth) and the present (Christ's dwelling in the human heart) to the future (Christ's return), thus completing the tripartite temporal structure we explore further in chapter 3.

The *Christmas Oratorio* weaves together two narratives: the birth of Jesus according to the gospels of Luke (parts I–IV) and Matthew (parts V–VI), and the welcoming of Christ into the human heart. This second narrative ranges from the expectation of his coming (parts I–II) to the preparation of the heart (part III) to the notion that he was "already there," as the terzet in part V announces. The turning point of this narrative is the aria "SchlieÙe mein Herze" in part III. Both the special attention Bach pays to this aria and his use of the symbolic hearts in part IV suggest that Bach was keenly aware of this "second narrative" when he composed the oratorio. However, this study makes no attempt to reconstruct Bach's own piety or demonstrate his position as the "fifth evangelist." Given the available sources, this is not possible. What is possible to reconstruct is how the *Christmas Oratorio*, both its music and libretto, fits into the religious landscape of early eighteenth-century Germany.

This book oscillates between musical analysis, source studies, and theology. It is written not only for musicologists but also for readers who are interested in the religious landscape of the early eighteenth century as well as the study of central

European culture at the end of the Baroque era. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, readers from different fields of study will sometimes need patience when the book seems to digress into unfamiliar territory. These tangents are necessary to establish the context of Bach's piece and to show how the *Christmas Oratorio* relates to the views of the Christmas feast in other text genres and disciplines.

Redefining Christmas

When Johann Sebastian Bach extended his leave from his duties as organist in 1705/6 by several months in order to study with Dieterich Buxtehude in Lübeck, not only did he enrage his superiors in Arnstadt but he also missed a little spectacle that took place during the Christmas season. Bach had already embarked on his journey when in November 1705 the students from the *prima*, the highest class at the Arnstadt *Lyceum*, petitioned the local consistory to be allowed to perform a *Christ Comodie*, a Christmas play.¹ As they pointed out, the play revived an older tradition. The petition affirms that plays like this had been common in the past, and the pupils assured the authorities that the performance would not give any reason for complaint. The text of the play was attached to the petition, allowing the members of the consistory to confirm that there was no immediate reason for theological or moral concern. Within two days—on November 25, 1705—permission was granted.

The *Christ Comodie* was not a Christmas pageant performed in church or on a public stage, as had been the case with the medieval mystery plays; it was instead an event during which the schoolboys went from house to house in Arnstadt (probably upon invitation) and enacted a dramatic scene in front of parents, children, and any other members of the household present. The play featured several stock characters from the nativity story: angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, and the three wise men, along with Moses and John the Baptist. The illustrious cast also included two peasants. While the two peasants do not belong to the biblical Christmas story, they are, as we shall see, essential to the Arnstadt *Christ Comodie*.² The characters of

¹ See Bernhard Grosse, “Zwei Arnstädter ‘Heilige Christ-Komödien,’” in *Programm des Fürstl. Gymnasiums zu Arnstadt* (Arnstadt: Frotscher, 1899), 16.

² Even though the peasants are inspired by the shepherds from the biblical nativity story from Luke 2, the author of the play associates them closely with the peasants by rendering their text in the local dialect while the other characters speak High German.

the play do not enact anything even remotely related to the biblical story; instead, their dialogue provided the framework for a catechetical and moral examination. If successful, the children were permitted to receive their Christmas presents. On the off chance that a child failed the exam (a case the text alludes to but never really anticipates) he or she was threatened with corporal punishment by one of the peasants, a shadowy fellow named Knecht Ruprecht.

Ruprecht's character, in name and function as punisher of the children, connects the origins of the Arnstadt play to medieval carnivalesque folk rituals that were originally associated with St. Nicholas's Day (December 6). Ruprecht traditionally served as the sidekick to St. Nicholas, representing the dark counterpart to the children-loving, gift-bearing saint.³ The Lutheran Reformation had attempted to abolish these folk traditions, replacing St. Nicholas, the bringer of gifts, with the "Christkind" (Christ Child) or "Heilig Christ" (Holy Christ), who brought the gifts on December 24 or 25. Knecht Ruprecht was soon abolished altogether.⁴ The traditions, however, proved more resilient than the theological shift. The folk rituals around the Christmas season did not disappear under the pressure of reform.⁵ Instead, the folk traditions amalgamated both old and new practices. Now the Heilig Christ or Christkind appeared in person and questioned the children before he handed over the Christmas gifts. In line with the older tradition, the character of the Holy Christ, while initially symbolizing the newborn infant Jesus, was typically played during the seventeenth century by a much older boy or an adult, who frequently wore a long beard (just as St. Nicholas had traditionally done).⁶ What changed was not so much the ritual but rather the name of the central character. Even his visual representation remained essentially the same: the Heilige Christ was a visual amalgamation of the Lutheran Christkind and the older St. Nicholas tradition.

The practice of celebrating the end of the year with masks and pageantry was, of course, much older. Dressing up, hiding behind masks, and noisy celebrations were remnants of the medieval tradition of welcoming the winter solstice, rooted in both Germanic rituals and the Roman Saturnalia.⁷ The St. Nicholas and Heilig Christ

³ Cf. Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 99–100.

⁴ See Joe Perry, *Christmas in Germany. A Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 36.

⁵ Robert W. Scribner has demonstrated the resilience of some carnivalesque traditions during the Reformation in his article "Reformation, Carnival and the World Turned Upside-Down"; see Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London: Hambledon Press, 1987), 71–102.

⁶ Cf. Joe Wheeler and Jim Rosenthal, *St. Nicholas: A Closer Look at Christmas* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 145.

⁷ For the pagan roots of some of the Christmas rituals, see the overview by Daniel Miller, ed., "A Theory of Christmas," in *Unwrapping Christmas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 3–37. See also the excellent study by Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995).

plays, Christmas masks, and New Year's plays can be traced throughout Europe during the early modern period and were frequently a gateway to inappropriate and riotous behavior. Participants hiding behind masks, confident in the anonymity that such props afforded, went noisily from house to house; some got drunk and some even took advantage of the security of the mask to engage in sexual acts with servants of the house.

The main points of the petition in question by the students of Arnstadt, assuring that there was no reason for complaint, allude to these well-known problems. In most German cities and towns, the Christmas plays were prohibited in the 1680s and '90s, and this apparently was the case in Arnstadt as the last evidence of that play in the seventeenth century dates from 1690.⁸ Reintroduced in 1705 by approval of the Arnstadt consistory, the "new" play represented a "purified" version without the contested and theologically problematic Heilige Christ. Although this version included a Knecht Ruprecht, he appeared as a rather toothless threat and only mildly punished the children. Earlier sources for comparable Christmas plays from other German cities depict a much scarier and violent Ruprecht. Nonetheless, even with these changes the *Christ Comodie* in Arnstadt seemed to have ignited disorderly conduct and transgressive behavior. Its performance was sanctioned again in 1706 (Bach was now back in Arnstadt and would have witnessed the spectacle) but not in the years following. This, however, did not stop the boys from performing it. In 1713 nine students, plus two others, were arrested by the police during a similar play, and again in 1724 nine boys were taken into custody for inappropriate and riotous behavior during the Christmas season.⁹ Folk traditions like this, including the riotous excesses, existed all over Europe in the seventeenth century; theologians and secular authorities vehemently condemned them. Clearly, any holiday or local tradition that produced such a consistent police blotter would be problematic for the community image, no matter how popular it was. In Puritan England (and even more so in the Puritan states in New England) similar Christmas traditions were responsible for abolishing the celebration of Christmas altogether.¹⁰

Similar plays were enacted almost everywhere in central Germany in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, and so we can assume that Johann Sebastian Bach was familiar with the Heilig Christ plays even before he moved to Arnstadt. When Bach composed his *Christmas Oratorio* in 1734, the "Heilig Christ plays had long been abolished, at least officially. The discussions about the plays, which went

⁸ Grosse, "Zwei Arnstädter 'Heilige Christ-Komödien,'" 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Stephen Nissenbaum points out that Christmas was "systematically suppressed by Puritans during the colonial period. . . . It was actually illegal to celebrate Christmas in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681" (Nissenbaum, *Battle for Christmas*, 3). In 1659, celebrating Christmas was declared a criminal offense in Massachusetts. The reasons for abolishment of the feast resemble

on well into the eighteenth century, are indicative of a shift in the general understanding of Christmas and hold significance for both the theological and musical concepts of the oratorio. Although the Reformation had attempted to abolish older traditions, they were still very much alive. In fact, most of the traditions were gradually extirpated only in the last decades of the seventeenth century. The changes that took place in last third of the seventeenth century are particularly characterized by an increasing rejection of all external, physical, and corporeal aspects of religiosity (touching, moving, walking) in favor of an internalized and spiritualized faith.¹¹ The coming of Christ and his angels was not to be experienced in a public enactment but by meditating on the biblical narrative. Corporeality was preserved only on a linguistic level, in metaphors. An example for metaphorical physicality is the image of the bride and the bridegroom who are unified in spiritual love, an image that is frequently present in Christmas songs and Christmas compositions from the early modern period.

Leipzig played a central role in the so-called war on Christmas in the years around 1700. Several important treatises against the Christmas plays originated there, were written by authors who had received their academic training there, or were texts printed by Leipzig publishers. In fact, the plays had existed in Leipzig quite undisturbed until 1680. On December 24, 1676, the rector of Leipzig's St. Thomas School, Jakob Thomasius (1622–84), wrote the following account in his diary. It was his first year at the school, and he was obviously not yet familiar with all the details of his new position:

Haben vnser schulknaben, so
hierzv theils vom Thomas-, theils
von Niclasküster in vorigen tagen
erbethen worden, den heiligen Christ in
denen heusern agiret; vnd zwar vn-
denenselben auch Hetscher (ein guter
discantist) anfangs bestimmet,

Our school boys have, invited by the
sextons from St. Thomas and
St. Nicholas, acted the Holy Christ
in the houses; among the pupils
who were originally chosen to do so
was also Hetscher (a good discant);
however, since the honorable town

those we find in texts by German critics of the Christmas plays. Both mention the “disorders” that were associated with the feast. The law from 1659 states that the celebration of Christmas was abolished “for preventing disorders arising in several places within the jurisdiction, by reason of some still observing such Festivals as were superstitiously kept in other countries” (*Battle for Christmas*, 14).

¹¹ Material-corporeal elements of religiosity were an important part of folk culture as they were often more easily accessible to common people; however, these forms of religiosity were also more difficult to control by the authorities; cf. Richard van Dülmen, “Volksfrömmigkeit und konfessionelles Christentum im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft, Sonderheft* 11 (1986): 22.

weil aber E.E. Rath jüngsthin bey mir erinnern lassen, das die guten discantisten, damit sie bey solcher gelegenheit nicht etwa ihre stimme verliehren, außgesetzt werden solten, ist an Hetschers statt Erler verordnet worden. Den anfang haben sie, so der Küster zu S. Thomas gebraucht, der gewohnheit nach im Schulhuse gemacht da es noch tag gewesen gegen 4. vhr, vnd sich also vnsern (meinen, Conrectoris, des Sel. Cantoris vnd Tertii) Kindern präsentiret: *ipsius S. Christi personam agente M. Röslero Collaboratore*: vnd wird ihnen deswegen kein Gratial, außer mündlicher bedanckung abgestattet.¹²

council has reminded me recently that the good discantists should not participate so that they would not lose their voices, Erler was chosen instead of Hetscher. As the sexton from St. Thomas used to do it, they have started in the school during the day at about 4 pm and have played in front of our children (mine, the deputy director's, the late cantor's, and the tertii's). The part of Christ himself was played by the teacher Magister Rössler. They did not receive a remuneration but only an oral "thank you."

The Leipzig plays were supervised by the sextons of the two main churches, St. Thomas and St. Nicholas, which probably guaranteed a more orderly conduct than we have seen in Arnstadt. However, the plays could be strenuous for the boys' voices,¹³ so that the discantist Hetscher (who was, according to the list of the four choirs compiled by Thomasius in the same year, member of the second choir), was replaced with the boy Erler, who appears in Thomasius's list as a member of the less proficient third choir.¹⁴ The play, which was a semi-official event,

¹² *Acta Nicolaitana et Thomana: Aufzeichnungen von Jakob Thomasius während seines Rektorates an der Nicolai- und Thomasschule zu Leipzig (1670–84)*, ed. Richard Sachse (Leipzig: Wörner, 1912) 202–3.

¹³ David S. Büttner uses the negative impact the performance of the Christmas plays had on the voices of those who had to sing in church during the Christmas times as an argument against the plays: "Und nachdem die Comödianten in Städten gemeinlich solche Personen sind/die der Vocal-Music beywohnen/kan man leicht schliessen/wie andächtig und geschickt sie hierbey seyn müssen/die weder einen auffgeräumten Kopff noch ausgeräumte Kehle mit bringen/wie sie anders dem Schloff noch so viel abbrechen und erscheinen wollen," David Siegmund Büttner, *Christ-Larven oder Böß-benahmter Heiliger Christ / nach dem Ursprung und Häßlichkeit meist Historisch beschrieben* (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1702), 81. (And since the participants in these comedies in the cities are normally those who also perform the vocal-music (in church), one can easily conclude how pious and skilled they will be in performing their music. They neither have a clear head nor do they have a clear voice and they show up with not enough sleep.)

¹⁴ *Acta Nicolaitana et Thomana*, 196; regarding the duties and members of the four choirs, see the thorough study by Michael Maul, "Dero berühmter Chor": *Die Leipziger Thomasschule und ihre Kantoren*

was enacted in the presence of the rector and his colleagues, and it involved at least one of the teachers at St. Thomas, Magister Jacob Rössler. Rössler was also leader of the “Singstunden” (choir practice) and must have had considerable musical abilities. Rössler played the part of Jesus in the 1676 performance of the Christmas play—probably an unexpected choice for the role of Christ in a nativity play but fully in line with its character as an amalgamation of the Christ Child and the older St. Nicholas. Even though we can assume that the play contained some musical elements, the description by Thomasius does not suggest that larger portions of the text were sung. Even an extensive recitation of spoken text would have been strenuous to the voices of the boys, in particular considering the freezing temperatures in Leipzig at the end of December.¹⁵ Bernd Baselt, in his study of Schelle’s *Actus musicus* is mistaken when he assumes, misinterpreting a description of the play by Schering, that the Christmas play was performed in the two main churches and that the play was interpolated with familiar Christmas tunes.¹⁶ The play was not a nativity play but a typical Heilig Christ play. While the account by Thomasius does not question the practice of the play, it would soon be abolished. The Leipzig chronicler Johann Jacob Vogel states that in the year 1680:

Den 21. Dec. ergieng ein Verboth an die Küster / daß die *Larvae Natalitiae*, oder das so genannte Heil. Christ-Spiel nicht allein wegen der Churfürstl. Trauer / sondern auch wegen des besorglichen Schreckens und Furcht unter denen Kindern bey dieser elenden und betrübten-Zeit

On Dec. 21 an order was issued to the sexton prohibiting the *Larvae Natilitiae*, or the so-called Holy Christ Plays, not only because of the time of mourning for the Elector but also because of the worrying fright and fear among the children in this wretched

1212–1804 (Leipzig: Lehmsstedt, 2012). See also Andreas Glöckner, “Bemerkungen zur vokalen und instrumentalen Besetzung von Bachs Leipziger Ensemblewerken,” in *Vom Klang der Zeit: Besetzung, Bearbeitung und Aufführungspraxis bei Johann Sebastian Bach. Klaus Hofmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ulrich Bartel and Uwe Wolf (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2004), 86–96; Andreas Glöckner, “Alumni und Externe in den Kantoreien der Thomasschule zur Zeit Bachs,” *Bach-Jahrbuch* 92 (2006), 9–36; and the short overview in Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: Norton, 2000), 251–53.

¹⁵ Arnold Schering (*Musikgeschichte Leipzigs II* [Leipzig: Kistner, 1926, 76]) also assumes that music might have been part of the play, albeit without being able to provide evidentiary support: “Ganz ohne Gesang wird es auch dabei nicht abgegangen sein.” (“The whole thing might have been done not entirely without music”).

¹⁶ Bernd Baselt, “Der ‘Actus Musicus auf Weyh-Nachten’ des Leiziger Thomaskantors Johann Schelle,” in *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg. Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe XIV* (1965), 341.

solte eingestellet werden. Im
folgenden Jahre darauff ward
dieser Pöpstische Greuel gäntzlich
abgeschafft.¹⁷

and sad time. In the following year,
this papist atrocity was completely
abolished.

The *Larvae Natilitiae* (Nativity masks) was another common name for the Christmas plays in the seventeenth century. The two reasons stated for the eventual discontinuation of the *Larvae Natilitiae* are of different nature. The immediate cause is the official time of mourning that followed the death of Elector Johann Georg II in August 1680. At that time, public plays and musical performances were prohibited. On a more general level, the Roman Catholic roots of the plays as well as the fear and angst of the little children during the “sad times” of the plague, which raged in Leipzig (and other German cities) in 1680/81, that led to the prohibition of the plays. The authorities wanted to spare the children the encounter with the rod-swinging Knecht Ruprecht and his scary entourage.

While the chronicler’s account for 1681 does not mention the *Larvae Natilitiae*, Vogel states briefly in 1682: “Den 24. Dec. ließ E.E. Rath den so genandten H. Christ zu agiren verbiethen,”¹⁸ (On Dec. 24 the honorable town council prohibited the performance of the so-called Holy Christ). The abolishment of the plays in Leipzig in the early 1680s was preceded by a request to the local theological faculty, regarding whether the *Larvae Natilitiae* should be continued or abolished. The theologians from the university replied on March 1680:

Halten dannenhero schriftmäsig
davor, daß so beschaffenes
Heil. Christ-Spiel in Haupt
und Fuß zu verändern, daß
sowol die vornehmste Person,
der vermummte Heil. Christ,
als die unterste, nemlich der
Knecht Ruprecht, abzuschaffen
seynd, damit weder *Occasion* zur
Abgötterey noch zu allerhand

We deem it more appropriate to the
scripture to change the Holy Christ-
Play completely, that both the most
noble character, the masked Holy
Christ, and the least noble character,
Knecht Ruprecht, have to be abolished,
so that there is neither an occasion for
heresy nor for disgrace or luxuriance on
these occasions. The characters in the
middle, like angels, S. Peter, or

¹⁷ Johann Jacob Vogel, *Leipzigerisches Geschicht-Buch, oder Annales, das ist: Jahr- und Tage-Bücher Der Weltberühten Königl. und Churfürstl. Sächsischen Kauff- und Handels-Stadt Leipzig in welchen die meisten merckwürdigsten Geschichte und geschehene Veränderungen . . . enthalten sind* (Leipzig: Lank, 1756), 769.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 821.

Schand und Üppigkeit in Zusammenkünfften gegeben werde. Die mittel Personen können, als Engel, S. Petrus, oder von dem Heil. Christ abgeordnete Diener, die Kinder *examiniren*, beten zu lassen, und von Untugenden abzumahnem, in geziemenden Schrancken wohl beybehalten, und hierdurch die Kinder bey Christlicher Weyhnacht-Freude, die Agirenden aber bey den hergebrachten *Acczidenze* (darum es sonst zu thun zu seyn scheinen will) gelassen werden . . .¹⁹

the servants of the Holy Christ, can examine the children and admonish them to pray and keep them in the appropriate boundaries. This will keep the Christian joy of Christmas and provide, at the same time, the participants with the money they usually receive (which seems to be at the core of the problem) . . .

The decision by the university theologians could not save the Leipzig Christmas plays; instead of referencing theological reasons, the decree from 1680 used the plague and the time of mourning as a pretext for the abolition of the tradition. David Siegmund Büttner (1660–1719), a deacon in Querfurt with close ties to the Pietists in Halle, quotes from another decision in 1701 by the theological faculty in Leipzig. The statement by the university was an answer to a request by an unspecified German city. It was probably not Leipzig (where the tradition had already been abolished for quite some time), but the reply by the theologians demonstrates that the tradition was still well known and that it was still perceived as a problem:

[D]ie Weyh- und Christ-Comödie ist an und vor sich selbst in seiner Natur ein sündliches Wesen und schändlicher Greul der unter wahren Christen nicht zu dulden. Weiln 1) der Ursprung dieses Spiels abgöttisch. 2) der zarten Jugend abgöttische *Impressiones* von Christo / deßen heiligen Aposteln und Engeln gemacht werden / —solche Meynungen hernach 3) Anlaß

The Christmas or Christ-Comedy is inherently sinful and an abominable atrocity and it is not acceptable among true Christians. Because 1) the origins of this play are pagan, 2) the tender youth is presented with pagan impressions of Christ, his holy apostles and angels . . . this 3) might give reason to believe that what the scriptures tell about Christ

¹⁹ Alexander Tille, *Die Geschichte der Deutschen Weihnacht* (Leipzig: Ernst Keil's Nachfolger, 1893), 140.

zugedencken geben / als wenn das /
 was von Christo und seinen Heiligen
 aus der Schrift gelehret wird / Fabel-
 Werck wäre etc. etc. 4) Kinder beredet
 werden/ihre innige Kinder-Gebetgen
 vor dem verummten und vermeynten
 heiligen Christ / Engeln und Aposteln/
 ja gar vor dem verlarvten Knecht
 Ruprecht abgöttisch abzulegen.²⁰

and his Saints were fairy-tales as
 well etc. 4) And because children
 are talked into performing their
 faithful children's prayers in front of
 what only pretends to be Christ and
 the angels and apostles, yes, even
 before the person dressed as that
 pagan Knecht Ruprecht.

The Pietist Büttner's treatise against Christmas plays is based on a general mistrust of rituals and religious traditions. However, his quote regarding the decision of the theological faculty in Leipzig is trustworthy as it reiterates arguments we find in other treatises from Leipzig dating from the late seventeenth century. Johann Gabriel Drechssler (+1677)—one of the most vocal authors in the struggle over the Christmas plays—also had a connection to Leipzig. Drechssler was a teacher in Halle and had received his *magister* degree at the University of Leipzig in 1670 (with a thesis on music in the Old Testament, *De Cithara musica*²¹). He was therefore familiar with the traditions of the Christmas play in Leipzig in the late 1660s and early 1670s. Drechssler had a direct impact on the discussions ca. 1680. His criticism of the plays is echoed by sources for their abolishment: Vogel's chronicle had called the *Larvae Natilitiae* "Päpstische Greuel," and Drechssler points likewise to their roots in "papist" times and writes "*Larvae hæ Natilitiae (ita vocabimus) ad nos venerunt ex Papatu.*" Like Vogel, he also protests that the play scared little children without having a lasting educational value.²²

Drechssler's treatise was published in Leipzig in several editions, versions, and languages: the first edition, then without Drechssler's name but with the anagram "Chressulder," appeared in 1674 and included a theological treatise in Latin and an abridged version in German, significantly expanding the possible readership (fig. 2.1). His treatise (and the bilingual publication in Latin and German) was met with some criticism, especially that from an unnamed colleague who is quoted in

²⁰ Büttner, *Christ-Larven oder Böß-benahmter Heiliger Christ* (Halle: Waisenhaus, 1702), 104.

²¹ Johann Gabriel Drechssler, *De cithara musica* (Leipzig, 1670); with subsequent editions in 1671 and 1712; see Werner Braun, "Aspekte des Klingenden in lutherischen Universitätsschriften zwischen 1600 und 1750," in Ekkehard Ochs et al., *Universität und Musik im Ostseeraum. Greifswalder Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft* 17 (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2009), 14.

²² Johann Gabriel Drechssler, *Christianorum Larvas Natalitias Sancti Christi nomine commendatas, post evolutam originem, confodit Stylo Theologico conscientiosus Christi cultor Chressulder* (Leipzig: Coler, 1674), 7–8, 23, 123.

Christianorum
LARVAS NATALITIAS
 SANCTI CHRISTI
 nomine
 commendatas,
Post evolutam originem,
confodit
 Stylo Theologico
 Conscientiosus Christi cultor
CHRESSULDER.

LIPSIÆ,
 Typis & Sumptibus JOHANNIS
 COLERI, ANNO 1674.

Figure 2.1 Johann Gabriel Drechssler, *Christianorum Larvas Natalitias*, Leipzig 1674 (Universitätsbibliothek Mannheim)

a later edition. Drechssler published a second edition of the treatise in 1677, now including an *Apologia*, a detailed justification of his arguments. This edition likewise appeared under the pseudonym “Chressulder.”²³ A third edition of the book (including the *Apologia* and the German version) was printed posthumously in 1683, six years after the author’s death and now with his full name.²⁴ A separate edition of the German translation alone finally appeared in a 1703 issue of the short-lived Leipzig journal *Deliciarum Manipulus*.²⁵ In his widely published and also

²³ Drechssler, *Christianorum larvas natalitias Sancti Christi nomine commendatas, post evolutam originem, confodit Stylo Theologico conscientiosus Christi cultor: auctius jam prodit, cum Apologia, quam Autor opposuit festinatio quorundam judicii* (Leipzig: Coler, 1677).

²⁴ Drechssler, *De Larvis Natalitiis, Earumque Usu & Fine, Tempore, ut vocant, Sancti Christi solitis Cum Apologia* (Leipzig, Weidmann, 1683).

²⁵ *Deliciarum Manipulus, das ist: Annehmliche und rare Discurse von mancherley nützlichen und curiosen Dingen* (Leipzig and Dresden: Mieth, 1703), no. 18: “Curiöser Bericht wegen der schändlichen Weyhnacht-Larven so man insgemein Heiligen Christ nennet herausgegeben.”

frequently quoted treatise, Drechssler condemns the Christmas plays for being a remnant of Catholicism, as well as continuing superstitions and practices with roots in pagan traditions.²⁶ The plays were, to Drechssler, a profanation of Christmas. Its pagan roots were visible to him in the character of “Knecht Ruprecht.”²⁷ In the German section of his treatise, Drechssler gives a short account of the play and the part of Ruprecht:

Da nehmlich/lange vorher / verumtete
Personen mit klingenden Schellen
herumb lauffen / sich vor des Heil.
Christi Knecht / Sanct Martin
oder Niclas ausgeben / die Kinder
erschrecken/zum Beten antreiben / und
mit etwas wenigen beschenken. Rückt
hernach das heilige Weynacht-Fest näher
herzu / so nehmen die Irrgeister umb
desto mehr überhand: biß endlich den
heiligen Abend das gantze himmlische
Heer (welches der schwartze Popantz
vielleicht außschicket /) Häuser und
Strassen anfüllet. Da führt man das
neugebohrne Jesulein / den Heil. Christ
/ auff / mit Kron / Scepter und Bart
gezieret: gleich als ob das liebe Christ-
Kindlein in solcher Gestalt wäre auff
die Welt gebohren worden. Diesen
begleiten die Engel, S. Peter mit dem
Schlüssel / andere Apostel / und dann
etliche Rupert/oder verdammte Geister.

Long before [Christmas] masked
persons run around with jingling
bells, pretending to be a servant
of the Holy Christ, Saint Martin
or Santa Claus, scare the children,
admonish them to pray, and
give them little gifts. When
Christmas draws nearer, the
number of crazy spirits increases
until finally on Christmas Eve
the whole heavenly host (which
is probably sent out by the black
bogyman) fills the streets. Then
one enacts the newborn Jesus, the
Holy Christ [Play], ornate with
crown, scepter, and beard, as if
the dear Christ-Child had come
into that world that way. He is
accompanied by angels, S. Peter
with the key, other apostles, then
several Ruprechts or damned
spirits. Such a holy company is
led in front of little

²⁶ Drechssler, *Christianorum Larvas Natalitias* (1674), 7–8, 11–16. The latter had already been dealt with extensively in a book also published in Leipzig, Johannes Praetorius, *Saturnalia, das ist, Eine Compagnie Weihnachts-Fratzen, oder Centner-Lügen und possierliche Positiones . . . Im Jahr: LLeber! antV-Vorte deM Narren naCh seIner Narrheit* (Leipzig: Joh. Wittigau, [1663]).

²⁷ Drechssler, *Christianorum Larvas Natalitias* (1674), 8, 50–53. Ruprecht was encountered frequently in central-German Christmas plays in the seventeenth century, and his presence in the rituals around Christmas was increasingly a target for criticism; see Karl Hase, *Das geistliche Schauspiel: Geschichtliche Übersicht* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1858), 119; see also Tille, *Geschichte der Deutschen Weihnacht*, 119 and 128–29.

Solche heilige Compagnie führt man vor die aus Furcht halb-erstorbenen kleiner Kinder. Der Ertz-Bösewicht / Knecht Rupert / fängt an wider sie eine harte Klage zu führen: der Heilige Christ / hefftig entrüstet darüber / bricht auf / will weiter gehen: der Engel Gabriel / gleich wie auch Petrus und andere heilige Gefährten legen eine Vorbitte ein; worauf der H. Christ besänfftiget / reiche Bescherungen lässet aufftragen / und Gnade und Güte den kleinen Abgöttern verspricht. Sie die betrogenen Kinder sind unter des voller Andacht / welche alle auff diese sichtbare Dunst [Gunst] gerichtet. Der H. Christ wird mit Gebet verehret wegen der Bescherungen; die umstehende Heilige wegen der kräftigen Vorbitt; der Rupert wegen leichter Begütigung und inhaltender Straffe.²⁸

children, who are nearly dead of fear. The arch-villain, Knecht Ruprecht, begins accusing them. The Holy Christ, being upset, leaves and wants to go; however, the angel Gabriel as well as Peter and the other companions intercede and placate the Holy Christ, after which he makes them bring in plenty of gifts and promises mercy and kindness to the little idols. The little children, who were cheated, are meanwhile full of devotion which is directed toward this visible mercy. The Holy Christ is worshipped with prayers because of the gifts; the surrounding saints because of their intercessions; and Ruprecht because of the mercy and only light punishment.

The depiction of Christ, not as a little child as we (and obviously Drechssler) would expect in a Christmas play, but as a grown man, explains why, in the 1676 Leipzig performance described by Thomasius, Christ was played not by one of the boys but by the teacher Jacob Rössler. Drechssler elaborates in a detailed theological argument that the tradition and practice of the *Larvae Natilitiae* contradicted Christian ethics and the Ten Commandments. Even more than the theological problems of the plays themselves, the *Larvae* created an opportunity for ethically questionable misbehavior; the boys often changed the texts and occasionally would even mock both Christ and the listeners:

Der H. Christ kömmt: der H. Christ brummet: der H. Christ hat mir einen Quarck bescheret: der arme H. Christ fiel in Koth: der arme H. Christ ist nicht viel werth: der H. Christ ist ein Mausekopff etc. . . .²⁹

The Holy Christ comes; the Holy Christ growls; the Holy Christ has presented me with some rubbish; the Holy Christ fell into the crap; the poor Holy Christ is not worth much; the Holy Christ is a mouse-head . . .

²⁸ Drechssler, *Christianorum Larvas Natalitias* (1674), 91–93.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

In other words, besides being theologically suspect, the Christmas plays were an opportunity for the boys to get out of control, to transgress religious and social boundaries. The *Larvae Natilitiae* with their rituals and practices were indeed occasions for carnivalesque behavior, as it was described by literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin.³⁰ Bakhtin differentiates between several forms of folk culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. One form was comprised of “*Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the market place.” The Christmas masks in Leipzig greatly resemble these pageants, albeit on a much smaller scale. Bakhtin describes a second form of carnivalesque folk ritual as “*comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written in Latin and in the vernacular.”³¹ The changes in the texts for the play in Leipzig, and the mocking of both Christ and the city’s citizens, fall into this second category.

An essential part of Bakhtin’s understanding of carnival (and the carnivalesque) is physiological: the bodily experience of the spectacle.³² This is one of the aspects that was criticized in Leipzig around 1680. Soon, the physical experience of religiosity should be replaced with purely spiritual piety.³³ With the abolishment of the Christmas plays, the Christmas rituals also lost a participatory element. As Bakhtin points out, “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.”³⁴ Finally, that behavior at all times questions (and threatens) the established order and authorities, suspending “hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.”³⁵ This had to be suspect, even threatening, to the authorities of cities in the second half of the seventeenth century, especially in Leipzig, where they attempted to enforce the social order and increase control over their subjects. The arrests made after the performances of the plays in Arnstadt, in 1713 and 1724, served this very purpose. Certain types of carnivalesque processions had, in fact, already been prohibited in Leipzig earlier in the seventeenth century, but we continuously find orders in the city records against dressing up in public and nightly excursions (mostly of students) until the early eighteenth century.³⁶

³⁰ The mocking transformation of the texts for the Christmas plays was a typical element for carnivalesque forms of popular culture as well; see Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Scholar Press 1994), 123.

³¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 19.

³³ See also Van Dülmen, “Volksfrömmigkeit und konfessionelles Christentum,” 25–26.

³⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 7.

³⁵ Cf. Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10. See also the perceptive interpretation of carnival traditions in early modern Europe in Burke, *Popular Culture*, 178–204, especially his analysis of Christmas traditions, 193–94.

³⁶ Cf. Axel Flügel, “‘Gott mit uns’—Zur Festkultur im 17. Jahrhundert am Beispiel der Lob- und Dankfeste und Fastnachtsbräuche in Leipzig,” in *Feste und Feiern: Zum Wandel städtischer Festkultur in Leipzig*, ed. Karin Keller (Leipzig: Edition Leipzig, 1994), 66–67.

When Thomasius was asked in 1683 whether it was permitted to celebrate the three days of carnival before Lent, he responded negatively—with arguments that closely resemble those given by Drechssler against the *Larvae Natilitiae*.³⁷

A direct connection between the Christmas plays and carnivalesque rituals is most vividly drawn in a novel by the famous playwright and poet Christian Weise, a friend of Johann Kuhnau's (Bach's predecessor in Leipzig). In chapter 34 of Weise's novel *Die drei ärgsten Erznarren* (1673) he outlines the contemporary Christmas rituals in satirical exaggeration:

Es kam die Zeit, da man die Weyhnacht Feyertage begehen pfl eget, da hatten sich an dem vorhergehenden heiligen Abend unterschiedlene Partheyen bunt und rauch unter einander angezogen, und gaben vor, sie wolten den heiligen Christ *agiren*. Einer hatte Flügel, der ander einen Bart, der dritte einen rauchen Peltz. In Summa, es schien als hätten sich die Kerlen in der Fastnacht verirret, und hätten sie anderthalb Monat zu früh angefangen. Der Wirth hatte kleine Kinder, drum bat er alle Gäste, sie möchten doch der *solenität* beywohnen. Aber *Gelanor* hörte so viel Schwachheiten, so viel Zoten und Gotteslästerungen, die absonderlich von denen also genanten Rupperten vorgebracht worden, daß er mitten in wä hrender *action* darvon gieng. . . .

It came time when the Christmas holidays are celebrated; on the preceding Christmas Eve all those present dressed in a colorful and wild manner, pretending to enact the Holy Christ. One had wings, another one a beard, the third was wearing a rough fleece. Altogether, it looked as if the lads had lost their way from carnival and had begun a month and a half too early. The innkeeper had little children; therefore, he asked all the guests, to be present at this celebration. But *Gelanor* heard so much nonsense, so many obscene jokes and blasphemies, which were in particular uttered by the so-called *Ruprechts*, that he left during the play. . . . Indeed, among the common people such rough and thoughtless sayings are very common,

³⁷ Cf. *Acta Nicolaitana et Thomana*, 569, "Ob man auch mit gutem gewissen die hin vnd wieder annoch gewöhnlichen 3. Fastnachtsfeyertage gestatten könne? *Respondebat negative*, weil (1.) selbige nichts anders als *reliquiae Bacchanaliorum*, welche der Teuffel auch endlich vnter die Christenheit eingeführet zu dem ende, damit nicht allein *pia devition de passione Christi* gehindert, sondern auch den leidens Christi gespottet würde. (2.) weil man selbige mit fressen vnd sauffen zubringe, welches auch vnverantwortlich . . . vnd eine todt- vnd himmelschreyende sünde sey; wofür auch diejeigen vor Gottes gericht zu antworten, so dieselben gestatten." (Whether one could, with good conscience, occasionally celebrate the three days of carnival? He gave a negative answer, because (1) they were nothing but remnants of bacchanals which the devil had introduced among Christianity to prohibit them not only from a pious devotion towards the Passion of Christ but also to mock the suffering of Christ; (2) because those days are only spent with scoffing and drinking which would be irresponsible . . . and a mortal sin for which those who allow it have to be held responsible before God's judgment.)

Schwange, darbey die Kinder von Jugend an sich liederlicher und Gottvergessener Reden angewöhnen. Ein Schuster, wenn er seinen Kindern ein paar Schuh hinleget, so ist die gemeine Redensart, der heilige Christ habe sie aus dem Laden gestohlen. . . . Doch gesetzt, es wäre ein Nutz darbey, weiß man denn nicht, daß der Nutz kein Nutz ist, wenn er einen grössern Mißbrauch nach sich zeucht. Es ist ein eben thun umb die Furcht und um die Freude, die etwan drey oder vier Tage währet. Ist die Furcht groß, so ist die Verachtung desto grösser, wenn sie hernach den heiligen Christ kennen lernen, da haben sie ein gut *principium* gefast, sie dürffen nicht allem glauben, was die Eltern von der Gottesfurcht vorschwatzen.³⁸

and the children already get used to such slovenly and blasphemous talking in their youth. When a cobbler presents his children with a pair of shoes, it is the saying that the Holy Christ had stolen them from his shop. . . . Even if [the play] were somewhat useful, don't the people know that the use is not a use if it leads to even greater misuse? The same is true for the fear and joy [of the children] which only lasts about three or four days. If the fear is great the scorn will be even greater when they afterwards meet the Holy Christ; they will have learned that they should not believe all the babbling of their parents about the fear of God.

Weise's novel has no intention of being a realistic depiction of contemporary practices; instead, exaggeration here is a vehicle for criticism. In spite of its satirical undertone Weise's description corroborates Drechssler's criticism published three years later. Drechssler urges his readers to celebrate Christmas as a day of contemplation of the salvific meaning of Christ's coming instead of carnivalesque rioting³⁹ with drinking⁴⁰ and mischief:

Der H. Abend soll ein Rüsttag und Vorbereitung zur Andacht seyn; Aber er wird zum heydnischen Lauff- und Sauff-Abend. Die Gassen sind voll

Christmas Eve should be a day of preparation for devotion; but it is turned into a pagan running- and drinking-evening. The alleys are full

³⁸ Christian Weise, *Die drei ärgsten Erznarren in der ganzen Welt* (1673; repr., Halle: Niemeyer, 1878), 181–83.

³⁹ Cf. Drechssler, *Christianorum Larvas Natalitias* (1674), 116–17.

⁴⁰ For the relationship between drinking, carnival, and social change in the early modern period, see B. Ann Tlusty, *Bacchus and Civic Order. The Culture of Drink in Early Modern Germany* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001).