

THE VOCAL MUSIC OF J.S. BACH¹

CLASS 1 Sept 21 BACH's LIFE AND PLACE IN MUSIC HISTORY

Summary

Bach led a busy and productive life. To support his large family, he took demanding jobs whose heavy responsibilities would have crushed someone less energetic and organized. And in between he somehow found time to compose an astounding volume of music—his collected work fill 70 volumes—including much of the greatest music of his or any age.

Outline

1. Bach's life—circumstances, major events; his character and personality
2. Bach's inheritance
 - Music in the Lutheran church. Examples of chorale as basis for music in the Lutheran service.
 - Baroque style. Major shift from Renaissance to Baroque, in melody, rhythm, harmony, and structure.
3. Preview of Cantata 140, to be heard next week

musical selections from

- Lutheran chorales; chorale preludes
- celebratory brass in cantatas: "Jauchzet, frohlocket!" from Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248 part 1
- Cantata 140, "Wachet auf," movements 1 and 4

Questions to consider

- Bach keyboard and instrumental works appear far more often on concert programs than his vocal works. Why might that be?
- Many concertgoers find it more difficult to listen to the vocal cantatas, passions, and oratorios of Bach than the oratorios of his contemporary George Frederick Handel. Why might this be? Do you find this to be true?
- Some music lovers wish that Bach had spent less time writing cantatas and more time writing instrumental works—say, trading some cantatas for more Brandenburg Concertos. Do you agree?

Objectives of this course

1. Learn about Bach's life
2. Understand the musical tradition he inherited, and the standard forms used by composers of the Baroque that Bach adopted.
3. Learn about his choral works: their purpose, their different forms.
4. Understand how the choral works reflect every aspect of Bach's deep religious faith, and incorporate the full range of human emotions from foreboding and deepest despair to joyful ecstasy.
5. See how Bach's choral and other vocal works combine dazzling technical skill and compositional technique with unsurpassed expressive power

Musical selection, "Jauchzet, frohlocket, auf, preiset die Tage," (Celebrate, rejoice, rise up and praise these days," opening chorus from cantata for the first day of Christmas, BWV 248, part I

Bach's life

"I was obliged to work hard. Whoever works equally hard will succeed equally well."
--J.S. Bach

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Johann Sebastian Bach was born March 21, 1685 in the town of Eisenach, state of Thuringia, in what is now East-central Germany, into the most prolific musical family in central Europe. Bach himself listed 42 relatives who were professional musicians (there were others that he missed), including his great-grandfather, grandfather, father, plus a wide variety of uncles, great uncles, cousins, second-cousins, etc.

Sebastian's first lessons came from his father, who taught him violin and harpsichord. His first lessons on the organ came from his uncle Johann Christoff, a well-known organist then engaged at the Georgenkirche in Eisenach. Sebastian was industrious and obviously gifted, and quickly became proficient on all three instruments. At age eight, he began attending the old Latin Grammar School in Eisenach, where Martin Luther had studied 200 years earlier; Luther later produced his famous translation of the Bible into German in the castle just above the town, so Bach would have grown up in a town imbued with Lutheran piety. Besides his studies in reading and writing, Latin grammar, and the Bible, young Sebastian sang in the choir of the Georgenkirche, where he was said to have an "uncommonly fine treble voice."

But tragedy struck when the boy was only nine: his mother died, followed only nine months later by his father. The 10-year old Sebastian was sent to Ordruf, 30 miles southeast of Eisenach, to live with his eldest brother, another Johann Christoff Bach, who was also a professional organist. Lessons with his brother brought him to impressive proficiency on the organ. And his excellent voice again opened doors for him, this time to a scholarship at the choir school at Lüneburg.

So it was that in the spring of 1700, the 15-year old Sebastian and his friend Georg Erdmann set out on foot for Lüneburg, a musical center 150 miles to the north. There he excelled in the two main subjects in the curriculum, theology, and, not surprisingly, music. His position in the select Mettenchor there gave him the opportunity to participate in large-scale musical productions that would have been unknown in the more rural, isolated towns of Thuringia. Through his family's musical connections and his own outstanding abilities, young Sebastian met several famous organists, and visited other musical centers, including Hamburg—all on foot.

At 17, he felt ready to take on full-time professional work. His first job was as organist in the small town of Sangerhausen. The next year he took the job of organist in the town church of Arnstadt, where Bachs had supplied music since the 1620s.

Video: John Eliot Gardiner, "Bach—A Passionate Life" excerpt

This was followed by succession of increasingly important musical jobs. Once established as church organist in the town of Mühlhausen (age 22), he felt settled enough to marry, taking as his wife his second cousin, Maria Barbara Bach. The next year, his growing reputation secured him the job of court organist in the provincial capital of Weimar; it was there that his first child was born. During his 9 years at Weimar he wrote most of the organ music that has come down to us, music that forms the core of the organist's repertoire, even today. By this time Bach was well known for his virtuosity on the organ, and for his unmatched skill at improvisation. Many of the organ pieces from this time give us a sense of his brilliance at the keyboard.

Musical selection: Organ Toccata in F-major, BWV 540 (excerpt)
E. Power Biggs, organ

Bach made his next career move at age 32, when he became Kapellmeister and Music Director at the court of Prince Leopold at Cöthen. This would have been a dream-come-true job for any aspiring organist and composer, but it was especially so for Bach. Prince Leopold was an enthusiastic patron of considerable musical talent himself, who played the violin and harpsichord. The orchestra at Bach's disposal included some of the best instrumentalists in central Europe. Bach wrote his Brandenburg Concertos for this splendid band.

Bach's six Brandenburg concertos are one of the glories of orchestral literature. Taken together, they encompass the full range of the forms and instrumental possibilities at his disposal; and they contain so many musical ideas brilliantly realized that music scholars, music performers, and ordinary concertgoers can only stand in awe.

At Cöthen, Bach had time to compose keyboard works as well, including volume one of his Well-tempered Clavier. This collection, which he assembled in 1722, still one of the foundations of the keyboard players art. This collection of 24 preludes and 24 fugues, one in each of the major and minor keys, includes an remarkable range of styles, forms, and moods. Some of the preludes have a light diaphanous sound, some fast with a driving quality, and yet others are slow and ruminative. The fugues range from bright and upbeat to lyrical and introspective. Bach sometimes uses the established Baroque dance forms, sometimes a simple harp-like series of chords, and sometimes a complex polyphonic structure.

Twenty years later, toward the end of his career, Bach assembled volume two of the Well-tempered Clavier, once again one prelude and one fugue for each major and minor key. Although most of Bach's music rapidly fell out of favor after his death in 1750, both volumes circulated among musicians. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven all played and studied it closely; we can hear its influence in their keyboard works. The two volumes would later be called the "Mighty Forty-eight."

Bach's happy years in Cöthen were interrupted when his wife Barbara suddenly died in 1720, leaving him to care for their 4 surviving children. The next year the 36-year old Bach married the 20-year old Anna Magdalena Wilcke, a fine soprano whom Bach had met in the course of his musical duties. Then in 1722, Prince Leopold married a woman who was not partial to music, and Bach's position at the court became tenuous. He applied for jobs elsewhere, including Berlin.

He competed for the job of Music Director to the main churches in Leipzig. In early 1723, after their first three choices had refused the job, the Town Council offered Bach a contract. "Since the best men could not be had," sighed one councilman, "we must settle for mediocrities." Bach would remain there for the rest of his life. His main duty was to provide music for the Sunday services of the two main churches in the city. Other official duties included playing the organ, rehearsing the ensembles, conducting music for other church occasions, plus teaching singing, keyboard, violin, theology, and Latin to the boys at the church school.

During his first 6 years in Leipzig, he composed largely to provide cantatas for Sunday services at the city's two main churches, plus larger pieces for special days on the church calendar, like the St. John Passion and St. Matthew Passion. Bach's responsibilities at Leipzig were many. Besides composing music for the town's four main churches and for various civic occasions, he had to teach Latin and music for five hours every day to the boys at the upper school attached to the main church, direct the choirs at the two main churches, and supervise musical programs at the other two churches. During five of his first six years, on top of his regular duties, he composed more than one cantata every week, perhaps the greatest example of sustained artistic creativity in musical history. And even while composing at this furious pace for the regular weekly service, he somehow found time to write three entire passion stories set to music, of which two have survived.

In the 1730s, Bach scaled back on his sacred cantata writing, turning his attention back to instrumental music, as well as to secular cantatas. Much of the secular music he wrote then was for his job as music impresario for Friday nights at Zimmerman's Coffee House, on Leipzig's main square. Although he no longer had to teach Latin (he was paying another man to take his place), he retained his other duties at the churches and the church school, and continued to teach private students, some of whom boarded at his home, in amongst his ever-growing family. He also maintained a side business in renting and selling instruments, and musical scores by himself and other composers. violin that was probably performed at one of the Friday night gatherings at Zimmerman's Coffee House.

In his last decade, Bach, perhaps thinking of his legacy, focused his compositional energies on his great encyclopedic works, revising the St. Matthew Passion, compiling the Well-tempered Clavier Book II, the Goldberg Variations, and the Art of the Fugue, and finishing the B-minor Mass. He died in 1750 at age 65, in good health until his last year, highly respected as a musician, especially for his unmatched skills at the organ.

Bach's inheritance: music in the Lutheran church

Lutheranism was a key force in shaping Bach's outlook and career. In 1517, the monk Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, launching the Protestant Reformation. Among the consequences was the displacement of Latin by German as the major language of religious music in Protestant Germany. At the same time, hymns and other religious songs replaced plainchant as the basic music of worship. Luther attributed almost magical powers to music, claiming that it could "drive out Satan and resist temptations and evil thoughts."

Luther and other reformers opened the door to instrumental music in the church. This was contrary to traditional Catholic doctrine, which held that only vocal music had the power to bring the soul to God. By the early 1600s, about the time that opera was beginning to thrive in Italy, music in German-speaking Protestant lands was diverging more and more from music in the Catholic south.

The music historian Paul Henry Lang says that it was during this time that

The intensity of feeling, the fantasy, and the profundity of the German genius now emerges; its austerity, its brusqueness, its robust yet dreamy, blunt yet sincere nature comes to the fore.

In early-Reformation Germany, a new form of religious song appeared, building on the earlier tradition of Gregorian chant, and adding elements of popular and folk songs. These tunes are called hymns in English, or chorales in Lutheran Germany.

Musical selections

"Wie Schön leuchtet der Morgenstern," chorale from Cantata 1

"Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern," keyboard chorale from cantata 1, played by Corey Hall

"Christ lag in Todes Banden," chorale for 4 voices, BWV 277, Hilliard Ensemble

"Christ lag in Todes Banden," keyboard chorale from BWV 4, played by Cory Hall

Musical selection,

"O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden," passion chorale from St. Matthew Passion, BWV 244, played by Cory Hall

"Jesus bleibet meine Freude," chorale with oboe obbligato Cantata 147, Voces8 vocal ensemble

"O Lamm Gottes unschuldig" keyboard chorale BWV 401, played by Cory Hall

"Komm heiliger Geist," chorale from Cantata 59/3, John Eliot Gardiner conducting the Monteverdi Choir

A **Chorale Prelude** is a short setting for organ of a hymn tune (chorale), usually played before the congregational singing of the hymn. Bach brought the chorale prelude to its highest form with long and emotionally probing elaborations of tunes that his audiences would have known well.

Musical selections:

chorale prelude on "Christ lag in Todes Banden," BWV 625, Helmut Walcha, organ

Fantasia on "Komm heiliger Geist," BWV 651, Christa Rakich, organ

chorale prelude on "In dulci jubilo," BWV 608, Simon Preston, organ

Bach's inheritance: Baroque style

Bach lived and worked at the height of the musical High Baroque. By his time, the major structural elements of Baroque music were already well established, and he used them all. Bach did not invent new musical forms. Rather, he summarized and extended the great legacy of Baroque forms and styles that he had inherited. His contribution was to expand the expressive possibilities of these forms, to combine the architectural structures with new depths of emotion.

- rhythm
- melody
- harmony
- structure

Rhythm: beats and meter. A beat is the smallest time division that you can comfortably tap your foot (or finger) to. Meter is the grouping of these beats into regular patterns. In Renaissance music the beat tends to be soft and to remain in the background. Most listeners do not immediately start tapping their feet to Renaissance rhythms. In a Renaissance song, meter follows the words, with accents generally coinciding with the rhythms of speech. Thus rhythm is irregular and not a separate element. We hear these speech-like rhythms in the music of Gregorian chant, where the beat follows the rhythm of the words.

By contrast, in the Baroque music we hear a strong regular beat, especially in fast movements. Most Baroque music has a stronger more regular beat than music from the Classical, Romantic, or Modern eras. This is one reason that Baroque music lends itself to jazz treatments.

Melody took on new importance during the Baroque. In most Renaissance music, the melody is stated only once, after which other things begin to take over; most listeners would have trouble singing the melody after just one hearing. In contrast, Baroque melody is strong and insistent. The composer gives it to us once, then again, and later several more times so we get it in our ears. Baroque melodies tend to be complex, and many are long, often with several different rhythms within one melodic idea. Baroque composers and performers added ornaments to their melodies to add shape and energy, and varied their melodies using devices such as sequences (A sequence is a short melody repeated at different pitch levels). Although Baroque melodies are generally memorable and full of interesting ideas, their greater range, more complex rhythms, and luxurious ornamentation makes them more difficult to sing than typical Renaissance melodies.

Harmony and texture. Note the three basic types of musical texture:

- Monody. The earliest Western music that has come down to us, Gregorian chant or plainchant, contains just one melody line: everyone sings the same melody at the same time, unaccompanied.
- Polyphony. Beginning in the eleventh century, church musicians began to add other melody lines, giving us the first examples in the West of polyphony, the simultaneous presence of two or more melodies. The melodies are of equal importance; they could be the same tune overlapping with itself, as in a canon like "Frere Jacques." Or they could be different tunes. Renaissance composers wrote great polyphony, culminating in the music of Palestrina. Baroque composers extended the possibilities of polyphony; the greatest of polyphonists was our own J.S. Bach. In Baroque music, polyphony dominates, even in a mostly homophonic sections.
- Homophony. Here we have one principal melody, with the other parts accompanying the melody. We think of Mozart, Schubert, or Beethoven as among the greatest masters of homophony, but Bach excelled here as well. Here is one among hundreds of examples:

Structure and the rise of instrumental music. Up through the Renaissance, nearly all concert or liturgical music was vocal. According to Catholic doctrine, vocal music alone had the power to bring the soul to God, so church music was essentially vocal. In secular music, instruments might accompany singers, but that was to make it easier for the singer to stay on pitch, or for a vocal ensemble to stay in tune and in rhythm.

During the Baroque, instrumental music emerged as an equal partner. In vocal music the words provide a structure: listeners can follow what's going on by attending to the words. But instrumental music must use other means to guide the listener's attention. Melody, harmony, and rhythm can all provide the necessary structure.

Preview of Cantata 140

This is the most famous, and most often performed, of Bach's church cantatas. The main melody is from a 1550 chorale by Philip Nicolai. Bach harmonized this tune as the last movement of the cantata.



The chorale text is based on the Bible reading for the Sunday on which the cantata was first performed. From Matthew Chapter 25:

There were ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet.... Keep awake, then, for you do not know the day when your Lord will come.

The festive, eager, opening chorus sets two groups of strings (violins and viola) against oboes and bassoon. Bach adopts the majestic French overture rhythm, with its double-dotted rhythm, and introduces a rising figure, suggesting the ascent of the soul. Following the multi-layer introduction, the altos enter with a jazzy-sounding "alleluia," followed in turn by the other voices. Bach telescopes several different scenes into this one chorus: the coming of the Bridegroom (a reference to Christ); the historic Jerusalem, with the night-watchman on his rounds; and Bach's own Leipzig, all abuzz with preparations for Advent and Christmas.

After a brief bit of narration by the tenor soloist (number 2), the soprano (representing the soul) and bass (representing Christ), sing a love duet. Yearning and longing are the dominant emotions, and the 6/8 rhythm suggests an outdoor serenade.

In the watchman's song (number 4), the violins and violas play a wonderful melody that represents the watchman on his rounds about the city. Now the tenors enter with the chorale melody of the opening chorus, which fits the watchman's theme in the strings perfectly. This movement appears in every collection of Bach's Greatest Hits. It has never been out of the repertoire, with hundreds of transcriptions for solo instruments, instrumental ensembles, and voices.



The bass soloist sings a recitative in which the harmonies show deep emotional expression (number 5). We then hear a light-hearted duet by soprano and bass (movement 6), who again represent the soul in dialogue with Christ; a solo oboe adds to the lively feel. The cantata closes with a four-part chorale by the chorus, one of Bach's most famous chorale harmonizations.

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*,
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*,

Bach Museum, Leipzig, "A Chronology of Bach's Life" at
<https://www.bach-leipzig.de/en/neutral/johann-sebastian-bach-%E2%94%80-chronology>

Appendix

Cantata for the first day of Christmas, BWV 248 part I

<p>1. Chor Jauchzet, frohlocket, auf, preiset die Tage, Rühmet, was heute der Höchste getan! Lasset das Zagen, verbannet die Klage, Stimmet voll Jauchzen und Fröhlichkeit an! Dienet dem Höchsten mit herrlichen Chören, Laßt uns den Namen des Herrschers verehren!</p>	<p>1. Chorus Celebrate, rejoice, rise up and praise these days, glorify what the Highest has done today! Abandon despair, banish laments, sound forth full of delight and happiness! Serve the Highest with glorious choruses, let us honor the name of the Supreme Ruler!</p>
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J.S. Bach, St. John Passion, BWV ... opening chorus (excerpt)

Karl Richter/Munich Bach Orchestra and Chorus

Herr, unser Herrscher, dessen Ruhm
 In allen Landen herrlich ist!
 Zeig uns durch deine Passion,
 Daß du, der wahre Gottessohn,
 Zu aller Zeit,
 Auch in der größten Niedrigkeit,
 Verherrlicht worden bist!

Lord, our ruler, Whose fame
 In every land is glorious!
 Show us, through Your passion,
 That You, the true Son of God,
 Through all time,
 Even in the greatest humiliation,
 Have become transfigured!