

THE VOCAL MUSIC OF J.S. BACH<sup>1</sup>

## CLASS 4 Oct 12:      EARLY CANTATAS I

Outline

1. Bach was a keyboard prodigy: by age 13, he could already play the most difficult organ compositions in existence. He left school at age 18 in 1703, took his first job as church organist at Arnstadt 1703-07, then moved to Mülhausen in 1707-08, all the while increasing his reputation as keyboard player.
2. He wrote several outstanding cantatas in this early period, displaying the qualities of a major composer. These cantatas demonstrate dramatic movement, emotional complexity, and mastery of all aspects of north German musical style.

## Musical selections from

- Organ pieces
- Cantata 4, “Christ lag in Todes Banden” (Christ lay in death’s bonds); chorale preludes on same theme, BWV 625 and several others; video lecture-demonstration by Rolf Lutz, Bachstiftung. Chorale tune used in each movement. 1 mournful sinfonia. 2. energetic variations on chorale tune. 8. chorale
- Cantata 70, “Wachet, betet” (Watch, pray), first movement
- Cantata 106, “Gottes Zeit ist die allerbest Zeit” (God’s time is the best time). Meditating on death. 1 lyrical opening sonatina. 2 chorus. 5 chorus with soprano arioso and instrumental chorale
- Cantata 21, “Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis” (I had much grief). 9 chorus, 11. chorus with fugue.

**A**s a scholarship student at the Choir School in Lüneburg, the young Bach excelled in the two main subjects in the curriculum, theology, and, not surprisingly, music. 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.

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: Fugue in G-minor BWV 542, Ton Koopman, organ

**C**horale Preludes are short settings for organ of hymn tunes (chorales), 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

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Fantasia on “Komm heiliger Geist,” BWV 651, Christa Rakich. organ  
 chorale prelude on “In dulci júbilo,” BWV 608, Simon Preston, organ

Cantata BWV 4, “Christ lag in Todes Banden” (Christ lay in death’s bonds)

One of Bach’s earliest cantatas, this masterful work depicts the mighty struggle between life and death. It takes both text and its hymn tune from a chorale by Martin Luther, written nearly 200 years earlier. Each of the cantata’s seven movements uses as its text one stanza from the chorale, with the chorale theme appearing in different forms throughout. Conductor and Bach scholar John Eliot Gardiner describes the work as Bach’s “first-known attempt at painting narrative in music.”

The mournful opening Sinfonia introduces the the chorale tune, in preparation for the stirring opening chorus (movement 2) . A slow duet follows for soprano and alto, accompanied by a walking bass. Next the tenors sing a variation on the chorale tune, against a brilliant counter melody from the violins. In the next chorus (movement 5), at the center of the cantata, the altos have the tune. Here, Bach brings all the color and drama of of Luther’s text to the music. A meditative bass aria follows, followed by a jaunty duet for soprano and tenor. The cantata ends with a four-voice harmonization of the chorale tune, one of Bach’s best (movement 7)

Video: “John Eliot Gardner introduces Bach’s Christ Lag in Todes Banden”

Video: Rudolf Lutz, Lecture demonstration on BWV 4, “Christ lag in Todes Banden,” excerpts



Musical selections:

- Chorale, BWV 279 “Christ lag in Todes Banden,” Hilliard Ensemble
- Same chorale arranged for guitar by Tilmann Hopstock
- Chorale prelude on same theme, BWV 625, Helmut Walcha, organ
- Movements 2, 5, and 7 from BWV 4, Cantata, “Christ lag in Todes Banden,” Masaaki Suzuki with the Bach Collegium Japan

<p>2. Choral  Christ lag in Todesbanden  Für unsre Sünd gegeben,  Er ist wieder erstanden  Und hat uns bracht das Leben;  Des wir sollen fröhlich sein,  Gott loben und ihm dankbar sein  Und singen halleluja,  Halleluja!</p>	<p>2. Chorale  Christ lay in death's bonds  given over for our sins,  He has risen again  and brought us life;  therefore we should be joyful,  praise God and be thankful to Him  and sing Hallelujah,  Hallelujah!</p>
<p>5. Choral  Es war ein wunderlicher Krieg,  Da Tod und Leben rungen,  Das Leben behielt den Sieg,  Es hat den Tod verschlungen.  Die Schrift hat verkündigt das,  Wie ein Tod den andern fraß,  Ein Spott aus dem Tod ist worden.  Halleluja!</p>	<p>5. Chorale  It was a strange battle,  that death and life waged,  life claimed the victory,  it devoured death.  The scripture had prophesied this,  how one death gobbled up the other,  a mockery has been made out of death.  Hallelujah!</p>
<p>8. Choral  Wir essen und leben wohl  In rechten Osterfladen,  Der alte Sauerteig nicht soll  Sein bei dem Wort der Gnaden,  Christus will die Koste sein  Und speisen die Seel allein,  Der Glaub will keins andern leben.  Halleluja!</p>	<p>8. Chorale  We eat and live well  on the true Easter bread,  the old leaven shall not  exist next to the word of grace,  Christ will be our food  and nourish the soul alone,  faith will live in no other way.  Hallelujah!</p>

Cantata 106. "Gottes Zeit ist die allerbest Zeit" (God's time is the best time).

This early masterpiece was written for the funeral of Bach's uncle, and first performed on 16 September 1708, during Bach's short sojourn in Mühlhausen. The score calls for just two recorders and two violas da gamba plus continuo, providing a soft-edged accompaniment to the delicate and refined vocal writing. After a peaceful opening sonatina, which seems to welcome thoughts of death, the opening chorus reassures the listener that we die at the appointed time. In the next two numbers, the tenor asks how to understand death, and the bass warns sternly of death's approach. At the center of the cantata is an emphatic choral fugue on the words, "It is the ancient law: human, you must die!" A solo soprano enters this complex texture, an innocent asking help from Jesus. At the end, the other voices drop out one by one, leaving only the plaintive soprano. This moving ending is followed by an aria for alto who says, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." The bass then sings the reassuring words that he will meet God in Paradise. The alto and chorus then join in, comparing death to sleep, an idea introduced earlier. A turns sunny in the final chorus, which ends with another choral fugue before a final "Amen."

Musical selections

- Movements 1, 2, and 4, John Eliot Gardiner, conductor, with the Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists

- Movement 1, sinfonia, arranged for two pianos and performed by Anderson and Roe

Video: Rudolf Lutz, "Introduction to BWV 106  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SuzTBqCbDs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SuzTBqCbDs)

<p>2a. Chor                  Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit.  <i>In ihm leben, weben und sind wir, solange er will.</i>                  In ihm sterben wir zur rechten Zeit, wenn er will.                  (Acts 17:28)</p>	<p>2a. Chorus                  God's time is the best of all times.  <i>In Him we live, move and are, as long as He wills.</i>                  In Him we die at the appointed time, when He wills.</p>
<p>2d. Chor und Arioso S  <i>Es ist der alte Bund: Mensch, du mußt sterben!</i>                  (Ecclesiasticus 14:17)  <i>Ja, komm, Herr Jesu! (Revelation 22:20)</i>                  (Instrumental Chorale:                  Ich hab mein Sach' Gott heimgestellt                  Er mach's mit mir wie's ihm gefällt                  Soll ich all hier noch länger leb'n                  Nicht wider strebn                  Seim Will'n tu ich mich ganz ergebn.)                  ("Ich hab mein Sach' Gott heimgestellt," verse 1)</p>	<p>2d. Chorus and Arioso S  <i>It is the ancient law: human, you must die!</i>  <i>Yes, come, Lord Jesus!</i>                  (Instrumental Chorale:                  I have brought my affairs home to God,                  He does with me as it pleases Him,                  if I should live yet longer here,                  I shall not struggle against it;                  rather I do His will with total devotion).</p>
<p>4. Chor                  Glorie, Lob, Ehr und Herrlichkeit                  Sei dir, Gott Vater und Sohn bereit',                  Dem Heiligen Geist mit Namen!                  Die göttlich Kraft                  Mach uns sieghaft                  Durch Jesum Christum, Amen.                  ("In dich hab ich gehoffet, Herr," verse 7)</p>	<p>4. Chorus                  Glory, praise, honor, and majesty                  be prepared for You, God the Father and the Son,                  for the Holy Spirit by name!                  The divine power                  makes us victorious                  through Jesus Christ, Amen.</p>

Cheerful interlude

Cantata 70, "Wachet, betet"

VIDEO: Rudolf Lutz conducting Bachstiftung from Protestant Church in Trogen, Switzerland

<p>Wachet! betet! betet! wachet!                  Seid bereit                  Allezeit,                  Bis der Herr der Herrlichkeit                  Dieser Welt ein Ende machet.</p>	<p>Watch! pray! pray! watch!                  Be ready                  all the time,                  until the Lord of glory                  brings this world to an end.</p>
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Cantata 21, "Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis" (I had much grief). 9 chorus, 11. chorus with fugue.

**B**ach wrote this work, his longest cantata, at Weimar, around 1713, later revising it for his first cantata cycle at Leipzig in 1723. The opening sinfonia is a good example of the many cantata movements that feature an oboe set against a voice or strings, in this case, violins. In the opening chorus, Bach might have been thinking of the young prince Johann Ernst, who had been a favorite student of Bach's, and who at the time of the cantata's premier lay close to death. The prince had introduced Bach to Vivaldi's concertos when he returned from a trip to the Netherlands with a sheaf of works by the famous Italian. The opening chorus can be heard as describing the concerns of someone

close to death. Bach follows with an aria for solo soprano, then a recitative and aria for tenor, then a chorus that ends with a choral fugue.

Part 2 opens with a dialogue between the soul (soprano) and Jesus (bass), a love duet of the sort that also appears in Cantata 140, "Wachet auf." A large complex and dark-sounding chorus follows, then a light tenor aria before the brilliant final chorus, which includes a fugue, that is scored for trumpets and drums.

<p>9. Chor - Choral T S <i>Sei nun wieder zufrieden, meine Seele, denn der Herr tut dir Guts. (Psalm 116:7)</i></p> <p>Was helfen uns die schweren Sorgen, Was hilft uns unser Weh und Ach? Was hilft es, daß wir alle Morgen Beseufzen unser Ungemach? Wir machen unser Kreuz und Leid Nur größer durch die Traurigkeit.</p> <p>Denk nicht in deiner Drangsalshitze, Daß du von Gott verlassen seist, Und daß Gott der im Schoße sitze, Der sich mit stetem Glücke speist. Die folgend Zeit verändert viel Und setzet jeglichem sein Ziel. ("Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten," verse 5)</p>	<p>9. Chorus - Chorale T S <i>Be at peace again, my soul, for the Lord has done good things for you.</i></p> <p>What good are heavy worries? What can our woe and sighing do? What help is it, that every morning we bemoan our hard lot? We make our torment and sorrow only greater through melancholy.</p> <p>Think not, in your heat of despair, that you are abandoned by God, and that God places in His lap the one who feeds on constant happiness. The coming time changes much and sets a destiny for each.</p>
<p>11. Chor <i>Das Lamm, das erwürget ist, ist würdig zu nehmen Kraft und Reichtum und Weisheit und Stärke und Ehre und Preis und Lob. Lob und Ehre und Preis und Gewalt sei unserm Gott von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit. Amen, Alleluja! (Rev. 5:12-13)</i></p>	<p>11. Chorus <i>The Lamb, that was slain, is worthy to receive power, and riches, and wisdom and strength, and honor and glory and praise. Praise and honor and glory and power be to our God for ever and ever. Amen, Alleluia!</i></p>

Resources:

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

Bach Cantatas Website contains a wealth of material on each of the cantatas, including the three covered in this class, at <https://www.bach-cantatas.com>

Emmanuel Music, BWV 4, text with translation by Pamela Dellal, and notes by Craig Smith.

vocal scores:

BWV 4 <https://files.constantcontact.com/7eb19081201/feb8518f-98a5-42f4-b215-816b4710906f.pdf>

## Appendix:

## Introduction to Bach's organ music © Graeme Kay /BBC

The chances are that anyone who has ever set foot in a church when the organ is being played will have been exposed at some point to the organ music of J S Bach. More than just a daily staple of the organist's diet, Bach's organ music represents the pinnacle of the art.

Grand toccatas and fantasies; the sophisticated counterpoint of preludes and fugues; virtuoso sets of variations; show-off concertos; astonishingly tuneful pedagogical sonatas; and chorale preludes ranging from complex fugal subjects to simply elaborated harmonisations of Lutheran chorales - in all these genres, Bach built on existing, inherited models and launched them into new territories of the imagination.

Bach appeals to players because the technical challenges range from easy to very difficult, so at every level of skill, organists can experience the power of the master. And he appeals to listeners because the music is exciting, of consistently high quality, challenging, stimulating and satisfying.

The other indispensable part of the Bach organ music tradition is the organ chorale, most commonly realised as a 'prelude', variation, fugue or fughetta. Defined as 'any solo organ piece based on a Lutheran chorale melody, the music could be an introduction to a hymn, a hymn accompaniment, an interlude between verses or between parts of the liturgy, or a stand-alone piece such as the Fugue on the Magnificat. It's reported that Bach improvised on the chorale melody, An Wasserflüssen Babylon for half an hour, especially to please the elderly composer, Reincken.

Many contemporary reports, and Bach's first biography, by Forkel, attest to Bach's virtuoso technique; indeed, so imaginative was his exploitation of the tone colours of the organ, that in one of his posts he drew complaints from the church authorities about the 'strange harmonies' he used in the chorale accompaniments.

The legacy of Bach's organ music can be found in later composers' reverence for the stylistic models of the Baroque period - especially notable in the work of Mendelssohn and Reger. For as long as there are organs, it is inconceivable that Bach's organ music will not be performed upon them.

**KEY WORKS****Independent of chorales**

Fantasia and Fugue in G minor BWV 542 "Great"; Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor BWV 582;  
Prelude and Fugue in E flat major BWV 552 "St Anne";  
Prelude and Fugue in e minor BWV 548 "Wedge";  
Toccat, Adagio and Fugue in C major BWV 564;  
Toccat and Fugue in d minor BWV 565;  
Toccat and Fugue in d minor BWV 538 "Dorian";  
Toccat and Fugue in F major BWV 540;  
Trio Sonatas BWV 525-30

**Chorale-based**

An Wasserflüssen Babylon BWV 653;  
Canonic Variations on Vom Himmel hoch da komm' ich her BWV 769;  
Das Orgel-Büchlein BWV 599-644; Six "Schübler" Chorales BWV 645-650;  
Chorale Preludes in the Clavierübung Part III BWV 669-689;  
"Kirnberger" Chorales BWV 690-713;

Meine Seele erhebt den Herren (Fugue on the Magnificat) BWV 733;  
"Neumeister" Chorales BWV 1090-1120  
[https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/bach/organ\\_intro.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/bach/organ_intro.shtml)

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Bach's cantatas: a brief orientation  
from The Baroque Music Site at [baroquemusic.org](http://baroquemusic.org)

### **1. Arnstadt 1703-1707: Some early cantatas.**

The story of Bach's cantatas begins with his first employment at the age of 18, in August of 1703, when he was appointed organist to the New Church in Arnstadt having recently dazzled the congregation with his brilliant performance at the dedication of their new organ. While his duties as organist did not require the composition of cantatas, Bach nevertheless produced some of his earliest choral works at this time, including Cantata 150: *Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich – Lord, my soul doth thirst for thee* which is probably his earliest, and the Easter Cantata 4: *Christ lag in Todesbanden – Christ lay by death enshrouded* which he most probably composed as a test piece in 1707 when he successfully applied for the position of organist in Mühlhausen. Also significant during his Arnstadt years is the celebrated story of his unauthorized 3-4 month absence in 1705 to hear the famous organist-composer Buxtehude in Lübeck; Bach's earliest cantatas owe a considerable debt to the inspiration and musical formats of Buxtehude.

### **2. Mühlhausen 1707-1708: Cantata 71.**

Moving to Mühlhausen in July 1707, he remained there only a year, during which his position as organist again made no choral demands. Bach did however produce a major work during this period which must have considerably impressed the congregation and church/civic dignitaries: Cantata 71, *Gott ist mein König*, composed for the annual inauguration of the city council, February 1708. Cantata 131 may also date from Mühlhausen.

### **3. Weimar 1708-1714: Few sacred choral works at this time.**

Bach had hoped that at Mühlhausen he would begin to realize a long-term objective: the establishment of a proper church music 'to the glory of God'. But the growing influence of the Pietists who tended to frown on church music led Bach to look elsewhere and on June 25, 1708, he sent in his letter of resignation to the authorities at Mühlhausen, having been offered a two-fold position as member of the chamber orchestra and as organist to the Ducal Court at Weimar. Once again however, his position offered scant opportunity for choral composition (probably only a handful of compositions including 18, 54, and 199) - a situation surely unsatisfactory for Bach and one which was not to change until 1714. In 1713 Bach applied for a position in Halle for which he composed a test cantata, possibly 21. This application may have been genuine, though more likely it was Bach's way of putting pressure on the Ducal Court at Weimar to improve his position. Whatever the circumstances, "on Friday March 2, 1714, His Serene Highness the Reigning Duke most graciously conferred upon the Court Organist Bach, the title of Concertmaster..." which entailed the practical duty of producing one new choral composition each month. At last the first major period of cantata writing was about to begin.

### **4. Weimar 1714-1717: The first major period of cantata-writing.**

Bach's promotion to Concertmaster in 1714 dated from March 2nd. He was required to produce one cantata each month, and the fourth Sunday following his new appointment fell on March 25th, the double feast day of Palm Sunday and Annunciation. It was for this very special occasion that Bach composed Cantata 182: *Himmelskönig, sei willkommen – King of Heaven, be Thou welcome*. At least 20 cantatas can be established with reasonable certainty as dating from this period, including Cantata 152

of which the opening instrumental Sinfonia is very much in Weimar style, and the Christmas Cantata 142: *Uns ist ein Kind geboren - For unto us a Child is born*. The famous Reformation Cantata 80: *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott - A sure stronghold is our God* also had its origins in Weimar, though not initially as a Reformation cantata. A feature of the Wilhelmsburg Palace at Weimar was the Chapel, in which cantatas would have been performed. It was referred to in 1702 as „a world-famous masterpiece of architecture". Set into the ceiling like a cut-out was the spacious musicians' gallery complete with recently renovated organ. Indeed prior to Bach's new appointment in 1714 the Gallery had been totally renovated, enlarged, and equipped with new seating and benches. The acoustics had been improved with a re-designed ceiling, and reflected down into the marble-walled chapel below, the sound would certainly appear to be coming from Heaven. Bach would certainly have considered himself well on his way to fulfilling his aim of providing a "well-regulated church music" consisting of choral music covering the Lutheran church year. However an internal feud broke out between the two jointly-reigning princes, prompting Bach once again to seek a new position, this time at the princely court of Cöthen.

#### **5. Cöthen 1717-1723: A secular court without church music.**

Bach arrived at the small Court of Anhalt-Cöthen to hold the position of Capellmeister, the highest rank given to a musician during the baroque age. His master was the young prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, barely twenty-five years old, the son of a Calvinist. As the Calvinists were antagonistic to the splendors of the Lutheran liturgy, there was no church music at Cöthen; however, the young Prince's religious beliefs did not bar him from enjoying a cheerful and cultivated style of living complete with secular cantatas and instrumental music featuring the latest styles and fashions. So apart from the occasional secular cantata in celebration of royal occasions, Bach was to take a break from cantata composition and concentrate on instrumental works. Bach enjoyed his time here; however in 1721 the Prince married, and his new wife discouraged the Prince's musical activities, prompting Bach once again to seek new pastures. The post of Capellmeister at Leipzig became vacant and appeared attractive, both for the position itself, and the wider cultural and educational opportunities it offered for Bach's growing sons.

#### **6. Leipzig 1723-1750: At last – a well-regulated church music.**

When Bach took over the St. Thomas cantorate in the spring of 1723 as the leading musician of the leading cantorate in Protestant Germany, he achieved at long last the opportunity to realize his artistic aspirations: "the ultimate goal of a regulated church music," which he had described in 1708 to the Mühlhausen town council and which he had tried to pursue, on a more restricted level, at the Weimar court. Bach at once embarked on a program to provide a piece of concerted music - a cantata - for every Sunday and feast day of the ecclesiastical year, except for the Lenten weeks preceding Christmas and Easter, when concerted music was traditionally suspended. This self-appointed task would require no fewer than sixty cantatas annually, an enormously challenging task (especially during the first several years) demanding extraordinary concentration and discipline.

That Bach was ultimately successful in his aim, not only of producing cantatas for the entire church year, but of producing five such cycles, is borne out by the summary of works in Bach's Obituary which clearly lists "five full annual cycles of church pieces, for all the Sundays and holidays". Unfortunately only the first three cycles have come down to us in recognizable and relatively intact form, so very little can be said about the character of the fourth and fifth cycles. It is clear however that the first five years of Bach's tenure as Leipzig Cantor were by far his most productive period of cantata composition.

The cantata supplied the principal music piece in the liturgy of the main service, and as such it highlighted a passage from the biblical lesson then interpreted it as well. Thus all of Bach's Leipzig cantata texts follow a standard pattern firmly grounded in the two-fold structure of a Lutheran sermon: *explicatio* and *applicatio*, biblical text and theological instruction followed by practical and moral advice.



The libretto ordinarily opens with a biblical dictum, usually a passage from the prescribed Gospel lesson that serves as a point of departure (opening chorus). It is followed by scriptural, doctrinal, and contextual explanations (a recitative-aria pair), leading to considerations of the consequences to be drawn from the lesson and the admonition to conduct a true Christian life (another recitative-aria pair). The text concludes with a congregational prayer in the form of a hymn stanza (chorale).

On the first Sunday after Trinity 1723, Bach began his **first annual cycle** of cantatas with Cantata 75, followed the next week by another extensive, two-part composition - Cantata 76: *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes - The Heavens declare the Glory of God*. A few weeks later came Cantata 105: *Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht - Judge not Thy servant oh Lord*, and Cantata 46: *Schauet doch und sehet - Look therefore and see, if any grief be found such as my grief*, two incredibly moving cantatas which mark a new plateau of artistic accomplishment in the church cantata genre, both in the intricacy of their compositional design and in the striking rhetorical power of their opening choruses. The same might be said for the opening chorus of Cantata 25: *Es ist nichts gesundes an meinem Leibe - There is no Health in us*, as well as the strikingly similar Cantata 103: *Ihr werdet weinen und heulen - Ye shall weep and wail* from the second yearly cycle. Also from the first year's group are Cantata 65: *Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen - They shall come out of Sheba*, for the Feast of Epiphany which rounded off Bach's first Christmas - for which he produced the Magnificat BWV 243 with interpolated Christmas verses. He also revised and re-presented Cantata 182: *Himmelskönig, sei willkommen - King of Heaven, be Thou welcome* during his first ecclesiastical year's cycle.

Cantatas from the **second year's cycle** include Cantata 93: *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten - He who suffers God to guide him*, Cantata 68: *Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt - God so loved the world*, and a re-presentation of the Easter Cantata 4: *Christ lag in Todesbanden - Christ lay by death enshrouded..* An example from the third cycle is Cantata 36: *Schwingt freudig euch empor - Lift up your voices with joy* for the Fourth Sunday before Christmas. One of several later additions to the five yearly cycles was Cantata 140: *Wachet auf ruft uns die Stimme - Sleepers wake, the voice is calling*. For another very stirring work, Cantata 80: *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott - A sure stronghold is our God*, Bach returned, in 1740, to a Weimar composition, adding two choruses which turned it into a cantata for the Reformation Festival. Cantata 76 was later revised for this same Festival.

The cantor and music director at St. Thomas' was also required to produce suitable music for special and civic occasions, of which the town council election pieces constitute a particularly important group. They were performed at the service that took place annually on the Monday after St. Bartholomaeus' Day (August 24) at St. Nicholas', after the formal election of the new city council and the rotation of the burgomaster seats. As the city council election service was a major communal-political event, Bach would have taken special care with a performance that invariably required a large ensemble and festive scoring with trumpets and timpani. A Leipzig newspaper reports on the civic events of August 31, 1739, on which occasion "the Royal and Electoral Court Composer and Capellmeister, Mr. Joh. Seb. Bach, performed a music that was as artful as it was pleasant..."

The German word *kunstvoll* in the sense it would have been understood in baroque Germany, cannot adequately be translated by the word 'artful'. *Kunst* in baroque Germany signified not so much 'art', as 'craft', and *kunstvoll* would better be translated as 'intricately crafted' as indeed Bach's music always was. His Leipzig audience would have readily perceived the wealth of detail, the intricate contrapuntal patterns woven around a well-known chorale melody in one of his opening cantata movements. But the report adds that the music was also 'pleasant', and herein lies a feature equally valid today: Bach's music can be heard with as much pleasure by those with little or no understanding of the underlying

patterns. For those who persist, or for those with a prior knowledge of baroque musical forms, Bach's music gains with every repetition, as yet more detail is revealed.

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Notes on Cantata 106, "Gottes Zeit ist die allerbest Zeit," by Michael Beattie  
for Emmanuel Church, Boston

Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit (Actus Tragicus), Bach's first masterpiece in the cantata genre, may have been written for the funeral of his uncle. The work alludes to an older generation of compositions. Even the orchestration - two recorders, two violas da gamba, and continuo - gives the work a distinctly 'ancient' quality. The cantata is virtually through-composed, rather like a motet, with each line of text signaling a complete musical change of character. The chorale overlay (both instrumental and vocal) and interplay of scripture are of great sophistication throughout.

The opening Sonatina, warm and hushed, illustrates an important metaphor of the cantata, relating death to a peaceful and welcome sleep. The writing for violas da gamba is comfortingly linear, while the recorders wide pleading intervals, suggest the more yearning and restless quality pervasive in the piece. In the first chorus (a motet, really) the passage of time is beautifully captured on the word 'weben' [move]: endless wavering eighth note motives are passed from voice to voice. The subject of death is introduced amid troubling chromaticism.

There is extensive solo writing for all four voice types in this cantata. The tenor asks for help in understanding death, again making use of pleading, wide intervals. Scurrying recorders (and continuo) are the sole accompaniment to the bass' stark warning of impending death (no reassurance from our gambas here!).

The choral fugue on the words 'Es ist der alte Bund' [It is the ancient law] is severe in tone. The theme itself is remarkable, starting chromatically, then dropping precipitously by a tritone -Lutheranism at its most hard-edged. The childlike entrance of the solo soprano calling on Jesus would be striking enough without the unexpected instrumental overlay of the chorale tune (resigned and devotional in tone). At the end the voices and instruments drop out one at a time and the soprano is left desolately alone, without even continuo support - a heartbreaking moment and absolutely unique in all of the cantatas. In the next section the recorders put down their instruments; the tone becomes more contemplative as the words of Psalm 31 (sung by the alto) bring us comfort in the face of death. The cello makes a difficult climb up the scale and plays the repeated wavering half steps associated with death - effortful, but somehow less troubled than before. The bass, who earlier had sung the most uncompromising text of the piece, sings of the arrival in Paradise (that word colored by an appropriately high tessitura). After the entrance of the chorale, the bass continues ecstatically, the gambas playing an antiphonal wafting accompaniment like angel's wings.

The final chorus manages both intimacy and grandeur. In the instrumental prelude, the motive that has until now been marked by downward wavering half steps is now inverted, the upward intervals suggesting a sense of spiritual triumph. The chorus enters majestically accompanied by instrumental off-beats, like heavenly heart beats. A light, brilliant choral fugue ends the piece, with the final 'Amen' echoed by the instruments very softly - a sublime finish to a very great work.

[http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes\\_translations/notes\\_cantata/n\\_bwv106.htm#pab1\\_7](http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes_translations/notes_cantata/n_bwv106.htm#pab1_7)

Notes on BWV 21, "Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis" (I had much grief), by Craig Smith and Michael Beattie  
for Emmanuel Church, Boston

Several years into his tenure as music director to the court of Weimar, Johann Sebastian Bach was instructed to write one cantata a month for the chapel services. Near the beginning of this series Bach wrote what was to be his largest sacred Cantata, "Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis," BWV 21. Not only was this work written to go with the readings for the third Sunday after Trinity, but it served as a farewell to the gravely ill Prince Johann Ernst of Sachsen-Weimar. The young prince, who had been one of Bach's favorite and most talented pupils, was on his way to a spa in Swabia where he later died. Bach uses the main tune from a movement of Vivaldi's D Minor Concerto, Opus 3 #11, as the theme for the opening chorus. The concerto had been a favorite of the prince and with its moving text describing a grave illness, the whole movement should be seen as an homage to the young prince.

The work itself covers many different styles. The second and last choruses probably date from very early in Bach's career. The opening and the great chorale prelude "Sei nun wieder zufrieden," were written in 1714. Many of the movements were extensively revised for Bach's first Leipzig Cantata cycle in 1723. Certainly the work has a refinement and finish to it unknown in his early Weimar years.

The cantata opens with a marvelous sinfonia for oboe and strings. It is virtually a duet between the first violins and the oboe. After the complexity and density of the first chorus, the soprano aria with oboe obbligato "Seufzer, Tränen" is spare and startlingly angular. The tenor recitative and aria returns to the richness of the opening music. These two solo pieces are set to texts of Bach's favorite poet, Salomo Franck. Franck was probably the best contemporary poet that Bach ever set; certainly these intense texts inspired the composer to write some of his greatest music. The first two choruses are from Psalm texts. Between the first and second parts of the cantata was a sermon with further commentary on the designated texts for the third Sunday after Trinity. The second part of the cantata begins with a dialogue between Christ and the Soul. This was a favorite didactic device of Lutheran theology of the period. These dialogues are often associated with the erotic love poetry of the Song of Songs. A popular example are of this genre are the love duets in the cantata "Wachet auf!" Today's cantata was one of the few Bach pieces in Baron von Swieten's library in Vienna. Clearly Mozart saw this piece there, for the duet is inspiration for both "La ci darem" from Don Giovanni and the third act Susanna-Count duet from Le Nozze di Figaro.

The gigantic chorale prelude "Sei nun wieder zufrieden" is in a way the most ambitious and advanced piece in the cantata. It is one of the few chorale settings in the cantatas in which the darkness of the chorale text is undercut by the hope of the words sung by the other three voices. The sprightly tenor aria with continuo is a jolly interlude between the two monumental choruses that end the cantata. Trumpets and drums finally make their entrance in the last chorus punctuating the bravura choral writing. The fugue that ends the cantata is one of the composer's most brilliant creations.

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*Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis, BWV 21* - in two parts - is the longest and grandest of all the cantatas. It has a complicated history. The first nine movements may have constituted a cantata *per ogni tempo* [for any occasion] written in Weimar as early as 1713. There were many subsequent revisions, culminating in today's 1723 version (minus the trombones!) which includes two additional movements.

Given the wide range of styles found in this cantata, it is a piece of remarkable dramatic cohesion. It moves progressively from darkness into light. The mysterious opening sinfonia is a dialogue between oboe and solo violin (accompanied by a halo of strings) which seems to lead directly into the first chorus. Almost all of the choruses of BWV 21 are based on psalm texts. In Part I, the choral writing is very text specific. Like the great motet composers of the previous generation, Bach finds a striking new character for each line of text. In some cases even a single word is given its own special color (the freeze-frame moment on the word *aber* [but] in the first chorus is one example). Bach was mocked by his contemporaries for the stuttering repetition of the first word (*Ich, ich, ich...*); today it seems a moment of breathtaking drama.

The soprano aria "Seufzer, Tränen", in spite of its overwrought text, is a marvel of stark simplicity, especially given the density of everything that surrounds it. The anguish of the text is mirrored in the

tortured intervals found in the voice and oboe part. The tenor recitative and aria are on a different scale entirely. Bach's response to this highly dramatic text is appropriately extravagant, with especially picturesque orchestra writing.

The monumental choral prelude "Sei nun wieder zufrieden" moves in yet another stylistic direction. The interpolated chorale text appears first in the tenor section surrounded by complex counterpoint in the solo voices. Later it is taken over by the sopranos upon the entrance of full chorus and strings. The intimate tenor aria that follows is scored only for continuo - its lightness and optimism providing a perfect bridge to the final brilliant chorus. The text of the closing chorus is the same as that which concludes Handel's *Messiah* ('Worthy is the Lamb'). The entrance of the trumpets and timpani is a thrilling moment. After a brief introduction, the piece concludes with one of the most viscerally exciting fugues that Bach ever wrote. It cranks along at an almost hyperventilating pace before exploding ecstatically heavenward.

[http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes\\_translations/notes\\_cantata/n\\_bwv021.htm#pab1\\_7](http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes_translations/notes_cantata/n_bwv021.htm#pab1_7)

#### TIMELINE OF BACH'S LIFE

1685	Born 21 March in Eisenach, Thuringia	
1695	After death of mother and father, Bach leaves Eisenach to live with brother in Ordruf, where he enters the lyceum.	
1700	Lives and studies in Lüneburg on a scholarship. He is an excellent student, particularly in theology and music; his reputation grows as a singer, violinist, and keyboard player.	
1703	First professional job, as organist in Arnstadt.	First organ works
1707	Second professional job, as organist at Mühlhausen. Marries Maria Barbara Bach.	Organ works, first church cantatas, motets
1708	Appointed organist at Weimar. First child born.	Keyboard and instrumental works; Well-tempered clavier
1717	Appointed Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold at Cöthen. The Bachs now have 6 children.	Brandenburg concerti
1721	Maria Barbara dies. Bach marries Anna Magdalena Wilcke the next year.	Magnificat
1723	Appointed Thomaskantor in Leipzig, where he will remain for the rest of his life. Duties include teaching singing, keyboard, violin, harmony, theology, and Latin; rehearsing and directing choirs and ensembles for Sunday services at both principal churches, as well as composing. Eighth child born.	200+ church cantatas St. John Passion 2 other passions, now lost
1723-28	Writes one cantata every week for 3 of his first 6 years in Leipzig.	St. Matthew Passion
1729	Assumes direction of collegium musicum	keyboard partitas Christmas Oratorio
1730s	Composes more instrumental music, fewer cantatas	Goldberg Variations
1742	20th child born	Musical Offering
1747	Visits court of Frederick the Great at Potsdam	Art of the Fugue
1750	Dies, 28 July	B-minor Mass