

THE VOCAL MUSIC OF J.S. BACH¹

CLASS 5 Oct 19 EARLY CANTATAS II; INSTRUMENTAL COMPOSITIONS AT CÖTHEN

Outline

1. Bach served as court musician and composer at Weimar 1708-17. Exposed to Vivaldi's concertos, he transcribed and adapted them in order to learn the Italian concerto style. Wrote cantatas for the court, including several of his best.
2. He enjoyed favorable circumstances at Cöthen 1717-23—no onerous non-musical duties. With no elaborate church music required, a flood of instrumental compositions now poured from Bach's pen, including Book I of The Well-tempered Clavier, the solo sonatas and partitas for violin, the solo suites for cello, suites for orchestra, and the Brandenburg Concertos.
1. Bach's wife Maria Barbara died suddenly in 1720, leaving him with 4 children to raise. Eighteen months later he married Anna Magdalena Wilcke, a fine soprano who was to bear him 13 more children.

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



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Musical selections:

- Chorale, BWV 279 “Christ lag in Todes Banden,” Hilliard Ensemble
- Same chorale arranged for guitar by Tilmann Hoppstock
- 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 70, “Wachet, betet! (Watch, pray!)

The energetic opening chorus features the trumpet call invoking the Last Judgment, to which the voices and orchestra respond with agitated movement. The bass soloist follows with a recitative containing more ominous warnings:

Be afraid, obdurate sinners!
A day dawns,
from which no one can hide:
it rushes upon you with stern judgment,
O! sinful race,
to your eternal sorrow.

A reflective alto aria follows, accompanied by a mournful cello, in sharp contrast to the vehemence of the bass. The soprano sings a stinging response to doubters: Let the tongues of the mockers scorn, yet it will and must occur. Part I ends with the final verse of a hymn that Bach's listeners would have immediately recognized.

Later in the work comes a ferocious bass recitative with trumpet obbligato depicting "unerhörten letzten Schlag" (the unheard-of last stroke), another nod to the Last Judgment, as the trumpet quotes the hymn, "Es ist gewisslich an der Zeit" (Indeed the time is here), which Bach's listeners would have associated with the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). The work ends with a rich chorale.

<p>1. Chor Wachet! betet! betet! wachet! Seid bereit Allezeit, Bis der Herr der Herrlichkeit Dieser Welt ein Ende machet.</p>	<p>1. Chorus Watch! pray! pray! watch! Be ready all the time, until the Lord of glory brings this world to an end.</p>
<p>9. Rezitativ B und instrumental Choral Ach, soll nicht dieser große Tag, Der Welt Verfall Und der Posaunen Schall, Der unerhörte letzte Schlag, Des Richters ausgesprochne Worte, Des Höllenrachens offene Pforte In meinem Sinn Viel Zweifel, Furcht und Schrecken, Der ich ein Kind der Sünden bin, Erwecken? Jedoch, es gehet meiner Seelen Ein Freudenschein, ein Licht des Trostes auf. Der Heiland kann sein Herze nicht verhehlen, So vor Erbarmen bricht, Sein Gnadearm verläßt mich nicht. Wohlan, so ende ich mit Freuden meinen Lauf.</p> <p>(Instrumental Chorale: Es ist gewisslich an der Zeit, daß Gottes Sohn wird kommen [in seiner großen Herrlichkeit, zu richten Bö's' und Frommen.] Dann wird das Lachen werden theur, Wann Alles soll vergehn im Feu'r, Wie Petrus davon zeuget.)</p>	<p>9. Recitative B and instrumental Chorale Ah, shall not this great day, the collapse of the world and the ring of the trumpet, the unheard-of last stroke, the Judge's proclaimed words, the open gates of Hell's wrath, awaken in my mind much doubt, fear, and terror, since I am a child of sin? However, to my soul comes a ray of happiness, a light of comfort. The Savior cannot conceal His heart which breaks with mercy, His gracious arm will not abandon me. Therefore I will end my course with joy.</p> <p>(Instrumental Chorale: Indeed the time is here when God's Son will come [in His great glory to judge the wicked and the righteous.] Then laughter will be rare, when everything goes up in flames, as Peter bore witness.)</p>

Cantata 79, "Gott der Herr ist Sonn und Schild" (God the Lord is Sun and Shield)

The brilliant opening chorus projects Christian triumphalism with a military flourish.

1. Chor <i>Gott der Herr ist Sonn und Schild. Der Herr gibt Gnade und Ehre, er wird kein Gutes mangeln lassen den Frommen. (Psalm 84:12)</i>	1. Chorus <i>God the Lord is sun and shield. The Lord gives grace and honor, He will allow no good to be lacking from the righteous.</i>
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Cantata 54, "Widerstehe doch der Sünde," (Stand firm then against sin)

First performed in 1714 in Weimar, this cantata calls for only one voice (alto) plus strings. is the first of Bach's twelve cantatas for solo voice. The cantata begins with a striking dissonance, not resolved until measure 8. Conductor John Eliot Gardiner explains that "It is a deliberate shock tactic to rouse his listeners to the need to 'stand firm against all sinning, or its poison will possess you'". tLater in the movement come other harmonic surprises. Both the text and the unsettling harmonies are good examples of the in-your-face style that the young Bach sometimes adopted at this point in his composing career.

1. Arie A Widerstehe doch der Sünde, Sonst ergreift dich ihr Gift. Laß dich nicht den Satan blenden; Denn die Gottes Ehre schänden, Trifft ein Fluch, der tödlich ist.	1. Aria A Just resist sin, lest its poison seize you. Don't let Satan blind you; for those who defile God's honor will incur a curse that is deadly.
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Cantata 21, "Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis" (I had much grief)

Bach 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, scored for trumpets and drums.

2. Chor <i>Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis in meinem Herzen; aber deine Tröstungen erquickten meine Seele. (Psalm 94:19)</i>	2. Chorus <i>I had much trouble in my heart; but your consolations revive my soul.</i>
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<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>

Bach learns the Italian concerto style

Among all the great composers, Bach was the outstanding autodidact, going to great lengths to learn from other musicians. As a 20-year old church organist at Arnstadt, he requested 4 weeks leave to travel to Lübeck to hear and study with the renowned (and elderly) organist and composer Dietrich Buxtehude, a journey of 250 miles each way that Bach made on foot. He eagerly integrated into his own compositions the best compositional and dramatic techniques from Italy, France, and other centers of Baroque music. He learned what other composers were doing by taking whatever opportunities he had to hear their works--often traveling there and back on foot. Even more important, he copied out works by other composers as a way of becoming intimately familiar with their techniques.

At Weimar his most talented student was probably Johann Ernst, nephew of the Duke of Weimar. Under Bach's tutelage he progressed as performer and composer until at age 15 he journeyed to the Netherlands to hear and meet with leading Dutch musicians. Johann Ernst returned from Amsterdam with something that was to change Bach's composing career: several newly published volumes of concertos by the Venetian composer Antonio Vivaldi. Bach copied out most of these concertos for his own education. He then arranged (and sometimes recomposed) several of them for the young prince to play on the harpsichord. Copying out several volumes of concertos was a lot of work in the days before Xerox, but it taught Bach the essence of the Italian concerto style: lyrical melodies, uncomplicated harmonies, lively rhythms, and a clear structure. It was from Vivaldi that Bach learned to simplify his themes, and to develop these themes into a larger formal structure using the device of ritornello.

Antonio Vivaldi

Violin concerto from L'Estro Armonico, Op. 3 No 9. in D, first movement
Rachel Podger & Brecon Baroque

J.S. Bach**Harpsichord concerto BWV 972**

Peter Watchorn, harpsichord

Bach learned from Vivaldi's concertos and soon improved on them. Bach's own concertos were 2 to 3 times as long as Vivaldi's, the result of longer and more complex melodies, and greater complexity of harmony and development. Bach's concertos also have greater variety in the part writing: where Vivaldi's tutti often just accompany the soloist, Bach gives his tutti richer and more varied material. Bach also includes more complex and varied polyphony in his concertos, including fugues.

Resources:

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

Appendix: Bach's 33 Best Cantatas, chosen by three famous Bach specialists²

So just what is a cantata? The term comes from the Italian "cantare" and has to do with singing. A cantata is a vocal work lasting about 20 minutes that comprises several smaller pieces with solo voice, chorus and instrumental accompaniment — or sometimes all of these at once.

A cantata usually bears the same name as a church hymn, and the melodies and musical motifs of the hymn — and often the hymn itself — sound out over the course of the piece. In Bach's time, sacred cantatas were performed during church services, and the texts that were sung had to do with the theme of that Sunday's gospel reading. That's why there are cantatas for the specific Sundays and holidays of the liturgical year.

Bach composed cantatas week after week and had them performed by the boys of his St. Thomas Choir and whatever instrumentalists he could drum up. That explains his rationale for taking on the otherwise unattractive position of Cantor of St Thomas Church, expressing the wish to leave behind a "well-ordered compilation of sacred music." For posterity? Could the composer have dreamed that 333 years after his birth, the performance of 33 of his cantatas at his last place of work would be noted worldwide? One can only speculate.

Not a brook, an ocean!

"He shouldn't be named Brook but rather, Ocean!" is a bon mot attributed to Ludwig van Beethoven. It's a play on words: "Bach," in German, means "brook." Beethoven was referring to the universal quality of Bach's oeuvre. In that ocean, the cantatas are lesser known islands than many of his other works but are definitely worth a visit — or a revisit. While the music is appealing on first listening, it becomes more interesting with greater familiarity.

From the 33 "best" sacred cantatas, we've assembled a gallery of a few of our own favorites. Click through it and let us know if you've discovered something valuable there — or if your own favorite Bach cantata is missing.

And here are the 33 "best" as selected by Peter Wollny, Michael Maul and Sir John Eliot Gardiner:

- Nun komm der heiden Heiland, BWV 61

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<https://www.dw.com/en/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-bach-cantatas/a-44150152>

- Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 140
- Ich habe genug, BWV 82
- Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern, BWV 1
- Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen, BWV 12
- O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort, BWV 20
- Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis, BWV 21
- Es erhub sich ein Streit, BWV 19
- Schwingt freudig euch empor, BWV 36
- Wachet! Betet! Betet! Wachet!, BWV 70
- Unser Mund sei voll Lachens, BWV 110
- Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen, BWV 65
- Jesus schläft, was soll ich hoffen, BWV 81
- Liebster Immanuel, Herzog der Frommen, BWV 123
- Sehet, wir gehen hinauf gen Jerusalem, BWV 159
- Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott, BWV 127
- Himmelskönig, sei willkommen, BWV 182
- Der Himmel lacht! Die Erde jubiliert, BWV 31
- Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden, BWV 6
- Ihr werdet weinen und heulen, BWV 103
- Ewiges Feuer, O Ursprung der Liebe ,BWV 34
- Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes, BWV 76
- Die Elenden sollen essen, BWV 75
- Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot, BWV 39
- Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein, BWV 2
- Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht, BWV 105
- Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen, BWV 56
- Komm, du süße Todesstunde, BWV 161
- Liebster Gott, wann wird ich sterben, BWV 8
- Wer weiß, wie nahe mir mein Ende, BWV 27
- Christus, der ist mein Leben, BWV 95
- Nimm von uns, Herr, du treuer Gott, BWV 101
- Jesu, der du meine Seele, BWV 78