

J.S. Bach Cantatas and Passions

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Monument to Bach outside St Thomas Church in Leipzig, where he worked.

Historical context

Johann Sebastian Bach wrote most of his vocal music for Lutheran church services of the early 18th century. Two centuries earlier, Martin Luther had introduced religious reforms that aimed to involve ordinary people in worship. Luther encouraged the use of chorales (hymns) that everyone in the congregation could sing. Yet he also valued more complex music to be sung by a trained choir. A similar mix of accessible and complex music is found in Bach's church cantatas and Passions.

Bach's church cantatas were usually performed in Sunday morning services, between the Bible readings and the sermon. They provide a commentary on the Bible readings, showing how the Biblical message is relevant for 18th-century worshippers. His Passions were performed on Good Friday, as part of the church service enacting the story of Christ's trial, crucifixion and burial. Although Bach drew on fashionable features such as operatic styles, his church music was not intended to entertain. Instead its purpose was to shape the beliefs of worshippers and encourage them to undergo religious acts of penitence, prayer and meditation.

Key ideas

Bach's church cantatas and Passions are **multi-layered works**, using a mix of musical styles to communicate to all members of the congregation. The **recitatives and arias** are modelled on secular genres such as opera; their complex writing requires trained performers and would appeal to educated listeners. Recitatives allow lengthy texts to be declaimed, with keywords highlighted by melismas or colourful dissonance. Arias use instrumental ritornellos and dance rhythms to evoke stereotyped emotions as found in Baroque opera, such as love, tenderness or rage.

Another musical layer is supplied by **chorales**, whose melodies would be familiar to everyone in Bach's congregation. Chorales are the building blocks of large contrapuntal choruses, sometimes superimposed over musical structures that are self-sufficient in themselves. Bach also used concise harmonisations of chorales, played and sung by all members of the ensemble. These chorale harmonisations provide regular interjections in his Passions. They also typically act as the final movement of his cantatas, combining all performers in a summation of Lutheran beliefs.

In the St John Passion and St Matthew Passion, Bach used different musical styles to set various texts representing **different time-zones**. The recitatives represent the time of the historical Jesus; they set the Biblical words, sung by the Evangelist or by singers depicting Biblical characters. The chorales come from the 16th-century Lutheran church and represent its collective beliefs. The arias set 18th-century texts describing the emotions that individual Lutherans felt when contemplating the story of Christ's crucifixion. Often these different elements are used in dialogue—for instance, a recitative recounting Biblical events is followed by a chorale offering the Lutheran church's reaction to those events.

Things to listen for

Cantata 80 is based on Martin Luther's chorale **Ein feste Burg** (c.1529), a hymn often described as the battle-cry of the Reformation. Bach wrote some of the movements for a performance in Weimar in 1715, then added the remaining movements (including the opening chorus) for church services in Leipzig after 1723. Trumpets and drums were added by his son W. F. Bach for a performance in Halle after 1750.

The **opening chorus** elaborates the chorale using the style of the motet. Each line of the chorale is the basis for a contrapuntal theme stated in imitation between the voices (doubled by the strings). Each set of contrapuntal entries culminates with the chorale line played in long notes at the top of the texture by the oboes (and trumpets in W. F. Bach's scoring). The vocal counterpoint emphasises keywords in the chorale text, for instance F naturals and diminished 7ths on 'der alte böse Feind' (the old evil enemy) and rising or falling chromatic lines on 'grausam Rüstung' (cruel armour).

The second movement, an **aria** for bass and soprano, shows Bach's technique of musical layering. The bass sings how those born to God will be victorious in battle ('Alles was von Gott geboren'). An operatic rage aria is evoked by the bass's semiquaver melismas, and the strings' repeated semiquavers and arpeggiated figures. Over this, the soprano sings the second verse of the chorale, 'Mit unser Macht ist nichts getan', about how all humans require Christ's strength. Subsequent movements focus on the believer's spiritual journey with Christ. The chorale returns for the central movement, while the finale is a condensed, homophonic harmonisation of the last verse of the chorale—a typical ending for a Bach cantata.

In the **St John Passion**, listen for the mix of musical styles conveying the narrative and the Lutheran spiritual response. The Biblical story is set as fast-paced **recitative**, accentuated by modulations and remote harmonies. Choral interjections represent the **crowd** (*turba*), often with recurrent musical material. The theme for 'Jesum von Nazareth' (set to the circle of fifths, with a semiquaver obbligato for flute and violin, in no.2) returns in modified forms when the crowd protest they cannot commit anyone to death ('Wir dürfen niemand töten', in no.16), for their shouts to save Barabbas ('Nicht diesen, sondern Barrabam', in no.18), and for the High Priests' declaration of loyalty to the Roman emperor ('Wir haben keinen König', in no.23).

Further interjections are provided by **chorales**, in simple homophonic harmonisations commenting on the Biblical narrative. The first chorale (no.3) is sung after Jesus identifies himself to his captors and it expresses his self-sacrifice: 'O große Lieb, o Lieb ohn alle Maße' (O greatest love, o love without end). When Jesus tells Peter not to resist the captors, a further chorale (no.5) reinforces this message of obeying God's command: 'Dein Will gescheh, Herr Gott, zugleich' (Thy will be done, O Lord God).

In the **arias**, listen how the instrumentation, metre, tempo and key suggest the emotions felt by 18th-century believers. Unlike an opera, the arias are not for designated characters. Immediately after the Evangelist describes Peter as faithfully following the captured Jesus (no.8), the aria 'Ich folge dir

gleichfalls' (no.9) is sung by a soprano, not by the bass who will represent Peter in later recitatives. By changing the voice-type, Bach universalizes the emotions of the aria, signalling they should be felt by all his listeners. The flowing semiquavers in the flute obbligato, over the quaver tread of the continuo, suggest the ongoing journey following Christ. In 'Es ist vollbracht' (no.30), Bach brings out the different meanings in Christ's last words 'It is finished'. The outer sections are a lament in B minor, marked Molt' Adagio, with an intricately ornamented line for viola da gamba. The contrasting central section highlights the victory in Christ's words: here the key is D major, and the voice and strings imitate trumpet fanfares on the words 'Der Held aus Juda siegt mit Macht' (The hero from Judah triumphs with might).

Bach's **layering technique** is seen in movements such as 'Eilt ihr angefochtenen Seelen' (no.24). This is a bass aria, whose semiquavers and 3-8 gigue rhythms urge believers to hasten to Golgotha; superimposed over this are choral interjections 'Wohin?' (to where?). In 'Mein teurer Heiland' (no.32), the bass meditates on why Christ has been crucified, while a four-part chorus sings the chorale 'Jesu, der du warest todt'.

The Passion is framed by two substantial choral movements. 'Herr, unser Herrscher' (no.1), sets words of Psalm 8 to a variety of choral textures including homophony and points of imitation. The instrumental introduction creates a sense of foreboding with the woodwind suspensions over the scurrying semiquaver figures in the violins and the long tonic pedal. By contrast, 'Ruht wohl' (no.39) is a lullaby for the departed Christ, with instrumental figures gesturing downwards for the downbeats, as if kneeling at the grave.

Legacy and reception

Bach's church cantatas and Passions were forgotten shortly after his death. Their complexity did not suit the changed religious practices and musical tastes after 1750. In the 19th century the Passions were rediscovered as concert works, notably with Felix Mendelssohn's performance of the St Matthew Passion in 1829. Rediscovery of the church cantatas was much slower, partly because of obstacles posed by the taxing vocal lines and use of obsolete instruments. In the late 20th century, these challenges were overcome by historically informed performers, and several complete recordings of the cantatas have now been made, including those by Ton Koopman's Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra and Masaaki Suzuki's Bach Collegium Japan.

Other resources

For extensive information about all of Bach's vocal works and chorale melodies, visit the [Bach Cantatas](#) website. For digital scans of Bach's original manuscripts, visit [Bach Digital](#).

Further listening

Bach Cantata 4, *Christ lag in Todesbanden*

Bach Cantata 140, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*

Bach St Matthew Passion

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