

An Introduction to the Annotated Bach Scores - Sacred Cantatas

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Abbreviations

NBA = *Neue Bach Ausgabe* (collected edition of Bach works)

BC = *Bach Compendium* by Hans-Joachim Schulze and Christoph Wolff. 4 vols. (Frankfurt: Peters, 1989).

Liturgical Occasion (Other Bach cantatas for that occasion listed in chronological order)

*Gospel Reading of the Day (in the Lutheran liturgy, before the cantata; see below)

*Epistle of the Day (in the Lutheran liturgy, earlier than the Gospel Reading; see below)

FP = First Performance

Note: Some of the following material is taken from Melvin Unger's overview of Bach's sacred cantatas, prepared for Cambridge University Press's *Bach Encyclopedia*. Copyright Melvin Unger. That overview (which is available here with the annotated Bach cantata scores) includes a bibliography. Additional online resources may be found at <https://www.bach-cantatas.com/>, <https://bachcantatatexts.org/>, <http://www.jsbachcantatas.com/>, and <https://www.bach-digital.de/content/index.xed>. English summaries of source material may be found in the complete edition of Bach's vocal music published by Carus Verlag (2017).

The German Cantata Before Bach

In Germany, Lutheran composers adapted the genre that had originated in Italy as a secular work intended for aristocratic chamber settings. Defined loosely as a work for one or more voices with independent instrumental accompaniment, usually in discrete sections, and employing the 'theatrical' style of opera, the Italian cantata it was originally modest in scope—usually comprising no more than a couple of recitative-aria pairs, with an accompaniment of basso continuo. By the 1700s, however, it had begun to include other instruments, and had grown to include multiple, contrasting movements. Italian composers occasionally wrote sacred cantatas, though not for liturgical use. In Germany, however, Lutheran composers adapted the genre for use in the main weekly service, where it subsumed musical elements already present: the concerted motet and the chorale. Defined functionally rather than structurally or stylistically, the resulting works were usually not called cantatas, but went by a variety of other names. Indeed, most of Bach's works carry no designation other than the intended liturgical occasion. It was not until the nineteenth century, when scholars sought to categorise these works on the basis of their style and form, that they were retrospectively called cantatas. The term was then applied to earlier analogues, which, though incorporating rhetorical features of Italian monody (brought to Germany by Heinrich Schütz, among others), did not yet have recitatives and operatic-style arias. Sometimes the two types were now differentiated as 'old-style' or 'new-style' / 'reform-style'. The new type had become possible when poets began including madrigalian verse (suitable for arias and recitatives) in their librettos. Erdmann Neumeister (1671–1756) was apparently the first to do so in a systematic way, in the second of nine liturgical cycles of cantata librettos—published in 1704 under the title *Geistliche Cantaten statt einer Kirchen-Music*.

Usually placed between the Gospel reading and the sermon of the Lutheran liturgy, the German sacred cantata culminated a long tradition of 'sermon music', whose purpose was to teach and exhort the listener. This emphasis on the proclamation of scripture originated with Martin Luther himself, who stressed the importance of congregational participation, translating the Bible into German (New Testament, 1522; complete Bible with Apocrypha, 1534), writing a German liturgy (*Deutsche Messe und Ordnung des Gottesdiensts*, 1526), and composing German hymns, both text and melodies. Because of Luther's emphasis on the importance of enlivening scripture through proclamation, and because the German cantata was seen as an important medium for scriptural exegesis and application, it flourished. Librettos were written (often by clergyman poets) with this purpose in mind and therefore explored the themes of the day's scriptural readings—most often those arising from the Gospel. To serve its function as interpreter and amplifier of scripture, cantata librettos often combined heterogeneous texts—Bible verses, liturgical texts, hymn (chorale) stanzas, and newly created poetry—which produced a web of exegetical interactions.

The new poetic texts, in particular, were often emotionally charged expressions of personal devotion, reflecting the rise of orthodox mysticism and Pietism in Germany during the seventeenth century. They were of two general types: strophic poetry (set to relatively simple, song-like melodies), and madrigalian verse—defined by a relatively free, often prose-like structure (involving unequal line lengths, loose rhyme schemes, and changes of

metre), whose purpose was to communicate subjective literary content in a forceful way. As noted above, the subsequent adoption by cantata librettists of madrigalian verse allowed composers to incorporate the Italian theatrical style, i.e., recitatives and da capo arias. While there was significant opposition to the intrusion of this ‘worldly’ style—from Orthodox as well as Pietist quarters—, it ultimately became the standard.

In keeping with the various types of texts incorporated into cantata librettos, composers employed many musical styles. Biblical texts were often clothed in motet-like structures, each phrase of text being given a particular vocal gesture, which was then treated imitatively by the other voices in a contrapuntal texture. Having had a long and distinguished history, this ‘points of imitation’ technique accorded such movements the dignity of church tradition. On the other hand, the influence of the secular madrigal on the motet had led to more expressive text declamation and word-painting—rhetorical characteristics now seen also in cantata movements. Biblical texts might also be presented in the (necessarily more homophonic) polychoral style made popular by Venetian composers around 1600.

Chorale texts were often presented with tune intact, though they might also be paraphrased in recitatives and arias. The inclusion of chorales reflected the Lutheran emphasis on congregational assent, even if they were rendered by the chorus alone. Chorale-based movements varied greatly, ranging from simple cantional settings in which the tune was carried by the soprano, undergirded by alto, tenor, and bass, in homophonic texture, to elaborate settings that embedded the hymn tune as a *cantus firmus* (with or without words) in an elaborate concerto texture with its own text.

Newly created poetic texts were clothed in a range of musical forms. In the cantata’s early development, strophic poems (called odes) were often set as strophic arias. Other poetic texts were set in the manner of a ‘sacred concerto’ (motet for few voices). Eventually, when monody (as pioneered in Northern Italy) had flowered into recitative and aria, forming the foundation for all theatrical genres, recitatives and arias became ubiquitous in German cantatas as well.

Important composers of Lutheran church cantatas included Franz Tunder (1614–1667), Johann Rosenmüller (1619–1684), Dietrich Buxtehude (ca. 1637–1707), Johann Philip Krieger (1651–1735), Johann Pachelbel (1653–1706), Johann Kuhnau (1660–1722), Georg Böhm (1661–1733), Friedrich Zachow (1663–1712), Nicolaus Bruhns (1665–1697), Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767), Johann Mattheson (1681–1764), Christoph Graupner (1683–1760), Johann Christoph Frauentholtz (1684–1754), Johann Theodor Römheld (1684–1756), Johann Friedrich Fasch (1688–1758), and Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel (1690–1749), among others. However, Bach’s approximately 200 known extant sacred cantatas represent the culmination of the repertory.

While Bach’s obituary claims that he wrote five cycles (*Jahrgänge*) of sacred cantatas (which suggests a total number of about 300), fewer than approximately 200 survive complete. The tally does not include cantatas previously attributed to Bach but now considered doubtful or spurious: BWV 15, 53, 141, 142, 143, 160, 189, 200 (an arrangement of an aria by Stölzel) 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, and 224.

Most of Bach’s surviving church cantatas come from his Leipzig period, that is, they originated after 1723, when he became responsible for the weekly production of cantatas in the Leipzig churches of St. Thomas and St. Nicholas. Nevertheless, Bach did have occasion to write church cantatas before he came to that city.

In comparison to other contemporaries, Bach’s output is relatively modest. Telemann, for example, completed at least 20 cycles, of which about 1400 individual works survive. Similarly for Graupner, over 1400 sacred cantatas are extant. Stölzel’s prodigious oeuvre originally included at least twelve cantata cycles, some of them double cycles. Unfortunately, most have evidently not survived. In any case, the imaginativeness and complexity of Bach’s contributions to the genre stand them apart.

When, in 1708 Bach resigned as organist from a short tenure at St. Blasius Church in Mühlhausen, he stated that his ultimate aim was to establish a ‘well-regulated church music to the glory of God’. As we now know, Bach was given to writing encyclopaedic, comprehensive collections. Even if he did not complete five cycles, he evidently met this goal with respect to cantata production, for he could repeat works in subsequent years.

Although most of Bach’s (surviving) cantatas were written during two intensive periods of focussed work (between 1713 and 1716 in Weimar, and between 1723 and 1729 in Leipzig), they may be regarded as the centre of his lifework. Throughout his career he composed, rehearsed, and performed them. The result—what survives of his oeuvre—is a canon of unparalleled technical variety and expressive range within a distinctly individual style. If some of the texts now strike us as ponderous, sentimental, or moralistic, we should remember that librettists were more interested in hermeneutical persuasiveness than in beauty. Erdmann Neumeister, expressed this sentiment in the foreword to his publication of 1704:

In this style I have preferred to retain biblical and theological modes of expression. For it seems to me that a magnificent ornamentation of language in human artistry and wisdom can impede the spirit and charm in sacred poetry as greatly as it may promote both in political verse.

Ultimately, Bach's cantata settings transcend the time-bound elements of their texts, finding an inner core of truth that is both personal and universal.

The Leipzig Liturgy (HauptGottesdienst)

See Terry, *Joh. Seb. Bach Cantata Texts*, 32—49; Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach. The Learned Musician*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 255—57; Hans T. David and A. Mendel. Revised and enlarged by C. Wolff. *The New Bach Reader. A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), No. 113 (Bach outlines the service in the autograph score of BWV 61, *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* (for 1 S. in Advent, 28 November 1723); Günther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig* (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia, 1984), *Liturgical Life in Leipzig*, 86—95, 116—138.

Note: To have chant & polyphony, Latin & German side by side was in keeping with Luther's directives.

1. Organ Prelude (Ringing of bells at 7:00 a.m.)

Entrance Section (Mood: prayers of praise & thanksgiving)

2. Motet (Choir sings polyphonic motet, mostly from *Florilegium* of Bodenschatz)
3. Organ Piece
- 4a. Kyrie: Depended on which choir did the service:
 - First Choir: Latin chant or Latin polyphony
 - Second Choir: German Kyrie chorale ["Kyrie! Gott Vater in Ewigkeit"] with congregational participation
- 4b. Gloria: Latin intonation by liturgist, then continued by choir ("Et in terra"); alternatively the Latin intonation was followed by the German chorale, "Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr"; after 1700 the German version (with congregation) was more common; polyphonic Gloria sung only on special occasions
5. Salutation: Dominus vobiscum (The Lord be with you); Choir responds "Et cum spiritu tuo."
6. Collect for the day intoned in Latin before the altar. [This was Latin until after 1750; the congregation read along in their hymnbooks or prayer books.]

Service of the Word (Mood: Most important section because it was proclamation)

7. Reading of the Epistle (chanted?)
8. Litany (only occasionally: probably during Advent and Lent [Stiller, 129; Bach's note])
9. De tempore Hymn (introduced with an organ prelude)
10. Reading of the Gospel (chanted?)
11. "Credo in unum Deum" intonation followed immediately by Cantata. Alternatively, if there was no cantata, the intonation was followed by the remainder of the Nicene Creed chanted in Latin by the choir (Stiller, 123). Organist introduced cantata with improvisation (Stiller p. 80)
12. Creedal Hymn: "Wir glauben all an einen Gott" (Minister ascends the pulpit during the last stanza of hymn.)
13. Sermon on the Gospel
 - Pulpit Greeting and Admonition to Prayer (called *Präambulum* or *Praeloquium* or *Antritt*)
 - Congregational Hymn Response (Stiller, 124):

Ordinary Sundays:	"Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend"
Christmas to Mary's Purification:	"Ein Kindelein so löblich"
Easter to Rogate (6 th S. after Easter):	"Christ is erstanden"
Ascension & Exaudi (7 th S. after Easter):	"Christ fuhr gen Himmel"
Pentecost:	"Nun bitten wir den heiligen Geist"
Reformation Festival:	"Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort"
 - Lord's Prayer prayed silently.

- Gospel read once again
 - Sermon preached (one hour: 8:00–9:00).
 - Prayer Section: prayers, thanksgivings, intercessions, announcements; closing comments admonish congregation to remember the poor by putting something in the “poor boxes” near the door.
 - Silent Lord’s Prayer
 - Priest leaves pulpit with Pauline benediction: “The peace of God, which passes all understanding...”
14. Congregational Hymn suitable for the Gospel or second part of cantata, or motet (Stiller, 80–81, 125)
 15. General Prayer of the Church (Stiller, 125)

Service of the Sacrament (two versions: one for high Sundays, one for regular Sundays)

16. Latin Preface (chanted) on high Sundays only. (See list in Stiller, 126.) However, if the Te Deum was sung, Preface was omitted.):
 - Priest: Dominus vobiscum (The Lord be with you.)
 - Choir: Et cum spiritu tuo (And with thy spirit.)
 - Priest: Sursum corda (Lift up your hearts.)
 - Choir: Habémus ad Dominum (We have them lifted up to the Lord.)
 - Priest: Gratias agamus Domino Deo nostro (Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.)
 - Choir: Dignum et justum est. (It is meet and just.)
 - Continues with the Proper Preface according to the season.
 - Choir sings a polyphonic Sanctus as the climax of the preface.
17. Lord’s Prayer: On regular Sundays only; on high Sundays it was omitted. During Lent the priest read a paraphrase-explanation of the Lord’s Prayer and followed it with an exhortation to people for prayer before communion. On Maundy Thursday this paraphrase-explanation/exhortation was then followed by the chanted Lord’s Prayer.
18. Communion
 - Words of Institution & Distribution (bell is rung, then words of Institution). During the distribution: Agnus Dei, motets, even cantata movements; then hymn(s): 7 hymns used regularly, depending on how many communicants there were (Stiller, p. 82–85, 128). These were apparently alternated with organ chorale preludes (see Bach’s note):
 - “Jesus Christus unser Heiland”
 - “Gott sei gelobet und gebenedeiet”
 - “Nun freut euch, lieben Christengemein”
 - “Wo soll ich fliehen hin”
 - “Es wolle Gott uns gnädig sein”
 - “Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren”
 - “Der Herr is mein getreuer Hirt”
 - plus perhaps “Ich danke dem Herrn vom ganzen Herzen” (Ps. 111)
 - Closing Collect (chanted by liturgist at the altar)
19. Aaronic Benediction (From Numbers 6), spoken by liturgist
20. Closing hymn sung by the congregation “Gott sei uns gnädig und barmherzig” and, on festival days, special hymns. (Stiller 128)

Bach notes the order for his first Advent 1 service (November 28, 1723) in the score of cantata 61 (see NBR 113):

- 1) Preluding
- 2) Motet
- 3) Preluding on the Kyrie, which is performed throughout in concerted manner
- 4) Intoning before the altar
- 5) Reading of the Epistle
- 6) Singing of the Litany
- 7) Preluding on [and singing of] the Chorale
- 8) Reading of the Gospel
- 9) Preluding on [and performance of] the principal music [cantata]
- 10) Singing of the Creed [Luther’s Credo hymn]

- 11) The Sermon
- 12) After the Sermon, as usual, singing of several verses of a hymn
- 13) Words of Institution [of the Sacrament]
- 14) Preluding on [and performance of] the music [probably the second part of the cantata]. After the same, alternate preluding and singing of chorales until the end of the Communion, and so on.