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A Chorale Cantata Contemplating the Passage of Time and Death.

BWV 8

Cantatr

Am firtis; Indere Limentage ward Ariotalis

"Liehfter Buff,m<mark>ann</mark> merð írfi fterfæn."

In the introduction to the Carus edition of BWV 8, Hans-Joachim Schulze (with translation by David Kosviner) writes, "Among Bach's chorale cantatas, *Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben* (O my God, when shall | perish), which was written for the 16th Sunday after Trinity, occupies a special position in that it exists in two versions in two different keys. The first version in E major was composed in September 1724 and thus belongs to the regular sequence of Bach's annual cycle of chorale cantatas. The second version in D major was written, in all probability, in 1747 and is the result of a late revision...
"For establishing the text of the cantata, the characteristic procedure used in the annual cycle of chorale cantatas was applied: a hymn, whose opening and closing verses remained unchanged, served as its basis. The remaining verses, however, were more or less freely adapted for the recitative and aria texts. The author of the hymn "Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben" was the theologian Caspar Neumann from Wroctaw. It was written in the years around 1690 and is thus one of the most recent hymns Bach took into consideration within the context of the chorale cantatas. As previously mentioned, the first verse appears in its original wording...

"To create a libretto with six movements, containing two chorale verses, two recitatives and two arias, which was probably in accordance with Bach's assignment. various elements had to be restructured. This applied already for the first freely written text of the cantata movement which is an aria. For this purpose the beginning of the third chorale verse was drawn upon, especially the question "But God, what will I think / when is it time for me to die?", as well as the ending of the second verse: "always go here and there / go forth, one after the other, / and already some are lying in the grave, / whom I surely knew." The garish colors that the author applies here are conspicuous, diverging from the original hymn: Why must you quake, my soul, with terror. / that my last hour today may strike? / My mortal flesh tends earthward daily / and in that place shall slumber truly / that takes so many thousands back. The librettist made use of the remaining verses from Neumann's third stanza for the following recitative: "Where will one lower the body, / and what about the soul? / Ah, what affliction can think of; / what will be my fate; / and where will my loved ones / one after the other be dispersed?" Here is the wordy version of the recitative: My heart feels in this life / fear, sorrow, grief: / When will my flesh no more endure it? / And who from all my pain / and the oppressive yoke of sin shall free my restless spirit? / My goods will be dispersed, / ah, but where will the ones / cherished / in all their hopelessness / and grief be banished?

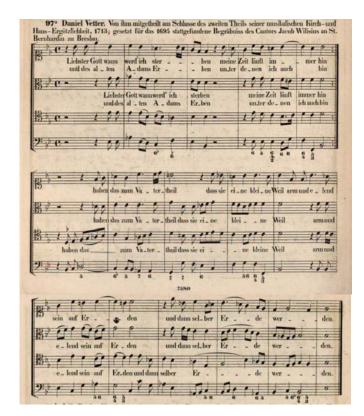
"The fourth stanza of Neumann's hymn delivers answers to these anxious questions, especially the first four [lines]: "But why all these worries, / am I not going to Jesus? Rather today than tomorrow, / for my flesh will be resurrected." Using effusive dactylic verses, thus departing from the original model yet again, the resulting aria is formulated as follows: Give way now, O sorrows and cares unavailing / My Jesus now calls me: who would not be saved? / For nothing I need / is here in this world. / Appear to me, blessed and jubilant morning, / when radiant and joyful with Jesus I stand. The final part of the hymn's fourth stanza is also devoted to the rejection of worldly goods, as is the relatively substantial last recitative which is derived from it. Caspar Neumann's final stanza, in its unchanged form, rounds off the libretto of the cantata...

"The melody which usually accompanied this poetry was "Freu dich sehr, o meine Seele" (O my soul, be thou rejoicing). Bach, however, chose a tune which originated from Daniel Vetter, who came from Wroctaw and had been the organist St. Nicholas's Church in Leipzig from 1679; he had written the melody in 1695 or even earlier and had published it in 1713 in the collection *Musicalische Kirch-und Haus-Ergötzlichkeit.*"

See Johann Sebastian Bach. The Sacred Vocal Music Complete Edition. Cantatas and Motets (Stuttgart: Carus Verlag, 2017), vol. 1, pp. 516–517; taken from H.-J. Schulze, Die Bach-Kantaten. Einführungen zu sämtlichen Kantaten Johann Sebastian Bachs (Leipzig and Stuttgart, 2006), translated by David Kosviner.

For the text of the underlying chorale, see note.







A comparison of Daniel Vetter's chorale setting with J. S. Bach's setting. Taken from Carl von Winterfeld. *Der evangelische Kirchengesang und sein Verhältniß zur Kunst des Tonsatzes. Dritter Theil: Der evangelische Kirchengesang im achtzehnten Jahrhunderte* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1847), pp. 140–42. For a comprehensive discussion of the chorale's history see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liebster_Gott,_wann_werd_ich_sterben. Accessed 2 December 2021. Changes in Bach's Abgesang are significant, resulting in a setting one measure shorter than the model. See note below for a discussion of Bach's approach to setting contemporary chorales.

Form: Chorus/fantasia - A (T) - Recit (A) - Aria (B) - Recit (S) - Chorale (each voice gets 1 solo). This cantata belongs to Bach's chorale cantata cycle (see notes).

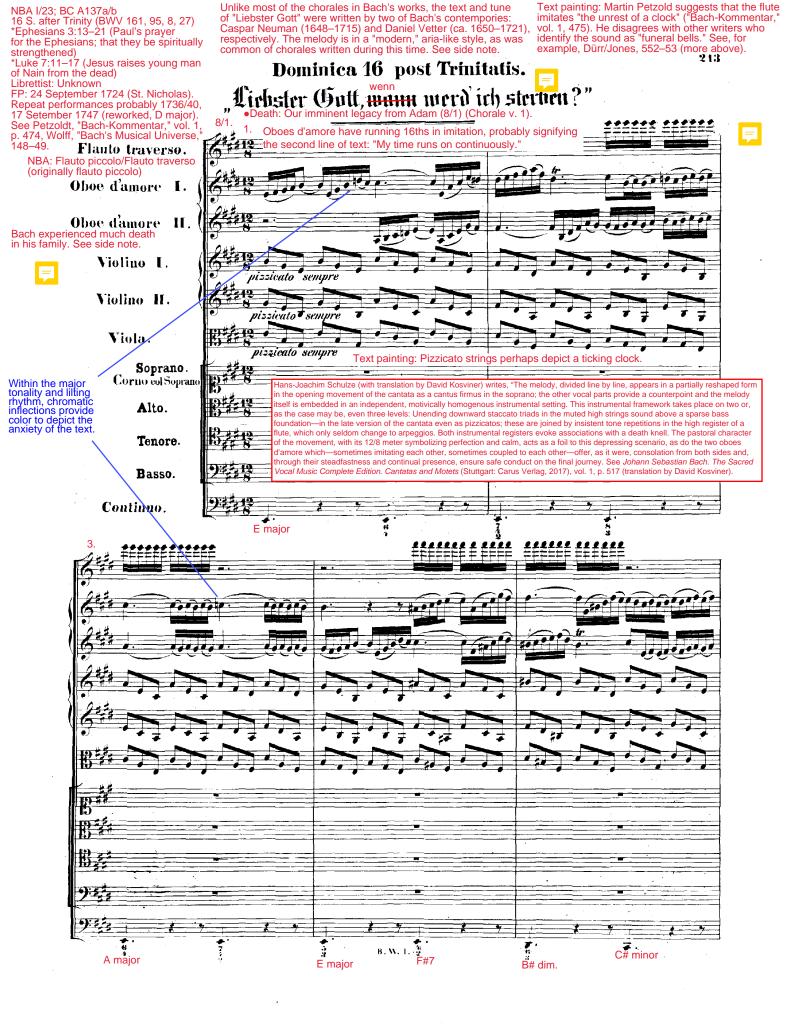
Regarding Bach's tonal plan, Eric Chafe writes, "E major...represents a special choice of key for Bach, one made in full knowledge that the other movements of a cantata in that key will be on the subdominant side of the key...a feature that encourages the idea of descent (flatward motion) followed by ascent (the return to the original key). Cantata 8, "Liebster Gott, wann werd" ich sterben," for example, "descends" from E trhough C# minor to A major before returning to E. See Eric Chafe, *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 151–52.)

Alfred Dürr writes, "Like all Bach's cantatas for this Sunday, *Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben* takes the Gospel account of the raising to life of the youth at Nain as an occasion for thoughts about one's own death. Unlike the earlier works discussed above (BWV 161 and 95), however, the cantata begins not with the desire for an early union with Jesus but rather with anxious questioning about death, which for the Christian, as one of 'old Adam's heirs', brings with it a consciousness of sin (nos. 1–3). All cares are dismissed, however, with reference to Jesus (no. 4) and to God's faithfulness, which is 'new every morning' (no. 5), one of many references in Bach's cantatas to Lamentations 3:23.

"The melody, by Daniel Vetter, organist of the Nicolaikirche in Leipzig, had been commissioned for the burial of the Cantor Jakob Wilisius, and was no doubt especially well known in Leipzig... Its expressiveness, which bears witness to the spread of Pietism at that time, distinguishes it clearly from the core hymns of Luther's time and of Orthodox Lutheranism, which are otherwise chiefly used in the chorale cantatas.

"...The four madrigalian middle movements are divided according to textual content and musical affect into two contrasting aria-recitative pairs. The first pair expresses anxious concern over death; the second pair, comfort derived from the certainty of God's faithfulness." See Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, revised and translated by Richard Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 551–553.

For John Elliott Gardiner's discussion of funeral bells ("Leichenglocken"), see *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), pp. 458–62. Rerences to funeral bells, death knell, and/or striking of the last hour are found in BWV 8/1, 73/4, 95/5, 127/3, 161/4, 198/4 (flutes). Often pizzicato strings are involved. Regarding clock ticking or passage of time, see BWV 8/1, 95/5, 102/6, 105/4, 127/3, 161/4. According to the seventh edition of Frederick James Britten's *Old Clocks and Watches and Their Makers* (New York: Bonanza, 1956), "Nearly all bracket clocks before 1675 strike the hour, and sometimes the half hour, indicated by a single stroke on the bell or another bell. Quarter-striking is rare in this early period." (See p. 88.) "By 1675 the bracket clock had become established in all the essential characteristics which were to continue in production for more than a century" (See p. 89.) "The various forms of striking set out in the section on bracket clocks are all found in long-case clocks..." (See p. 110.)







B.W. 1. 3

D# dim.7

E major

E major







Full-length ritornello, (modified), which interrupts the flow of the text.



E# dim.7

B major

B major

F#7

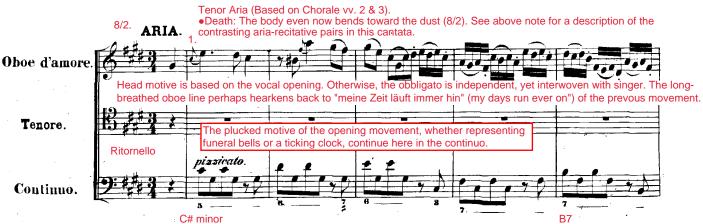


with Adam's descendents: all must die (see Genesis 3:19). Bach departs here from Vetter in the distribution of voices. See Petzoldt, *Bach-Kommentar*, vol. 1, pp. 478–79.







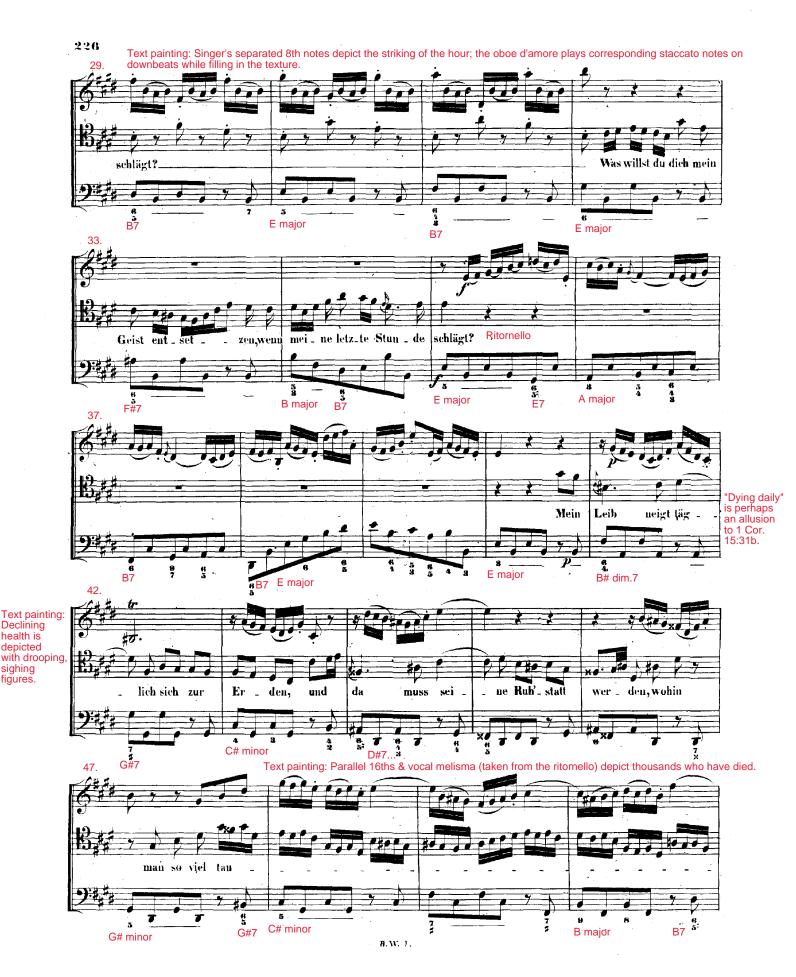


Text painting: Pizzicato continuo perhaps depict ticking clock (as in first movement).

Movements 1 & 2 both begin with questions, the first addressed to God, the second to the speaker him/herself ("I"). Martin Petzoldt notes that the movements thus correspond to movements 5 & 6: in movement 5 the speaker addresses the world with an imperative, in movement 6, the speaker addressed God. See *Bach-Kommentar*, vol. 1, p. 476.

B. W. 1.









Hans-Joachim Schulze writes, "In the first recitative, which is accompanied by the strings, strange modulations characterize the searching question concerning the fate of those left behind in this world." See *Johann Sebastian Bach. The Sacred Vocal Music Complete Edition. Cantatas and Motets* (Stuttgart: Carus Verlag, 2017), vol. 1, p. 517; from H.-J. Schulze, *Die Bach-Kantaten. Einführungen zu sämtlichen Kantaten Johann Sebastian Bachs, Leipzig and Stuttgart*, 2006 (translation by David Kosviner).



Bach often uses phrygian cadences for questions.







Alfred Dürr notes, "The words 'My Jesus calls me, who would not go?' in the fourth movement—in place of Neumann's 'Should I not go to Jesus?' ('Sollt ich nicht zu Jesu gehn?')—may be regarded as a reference to Jesus's words in the Gospel reading for the day, 'I say to you, arise' (Luke 7:14)." See Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, revised and translated by Richard Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 552.





















Bach's setting emphasizes the "modern" aria-like style of chorales written in Bach's time, with each phrase beginning after the continuo plays the downbeat. For more about Bach's approach to setting contemporary chorales, see side note above at movement 1.



Fx dim.7