

Introduction & updates at melvinunger.com.

NBA III/1; BC B23a/b

J. S. Bach labeled this work "motet," yet it is similar to the chorale fantasias that begin cantatas of Bach's chorale cantata cycle.

Occasion: Perhaps a funeral or memorial service
Librettist: Martin Behm (1557–1622): 1610 chorale, adapted from a 1608 setting with similar beginning.

Although only the first stanza is given in the autograph score, a "dal segno" marking suggests multiple stanzas would have been sung.

According to Martin Petzoldt (*Bach-Kommentar* 3:574) it was widely disseminated, with a Dresden hymnal printing two versions side by side: one version with 12 stanzas, the other with 15. (see note for more).

FP: 1736/37 (first autograph version), 1746/47 (second autograph version).

Instrumentation (first version)

Lituo I, II (see note)

Cornetto

Trombone I, II, III

SATB

This version was presumably performed out of doors, e.g., at a graveside.

The later version adds strings, continuo, and optional 3

oboes and bassoon (presumably doubling the vocal lines). See note for more.

Translation:

O Jesus Christ, light of my life,
my refuge, my comfort, my confidence,
on earth I am only a guest
and the burden of sin presses down heavily upon me.

Chorale Motet J.S. Bach

Motet BWV 118

Biblical allusions include Jesus' words "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), passages that refer to God as refuge and confidence (e.g., Psalm 94:22; Psalm 119:19: I am a sojourner on earth (Luther 1545: Ich bin ein Gast auf Erden), and Psalm 38:4: My iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me (Luther 1545: Denn meine Sünden gehen über mein Haupt, wie eine schwere Last sind sie mir zu schwer worden).

•Prayer to Jesus in view of the brevity and sinfulness of life.

O Jesu Christ, Mein's Lebens Licht

Use of alla breve meter with brass playing largely *colla parte* is characteristic of the traditional motet style (*stile antico*).

1. Lit. Lituo I & II

Corn.

Tromb.

The trombone theme derives from the alto and tenor voices accompanying chorale line 2.

B-flat major, B-flat pedal...

B-flat major

Throbbing bass suggests a dirge...

5. Corn.

Lit.

F7

B-flat major G7 C7

F major F pedal...

F7 B-flat major

10. (C7)

F(7) B-flat 7 G7

C minor

14. F7

B-flat major A-flat major B-flat 7 (E-flat major) E-flat major E dim.7 C major

Lines 1 & 2: The cantus firmus is accompanied in the lower 3 voices by imitative counterpoint derived from the chorale phrase.

Line 1 alludes to Jesus' words, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

18. **Soprano**

Alto

Tenore

Basso

In the choral sections, the instruments largely double the voices.

The litui fall silent for chorale line 1.

Corn.u.Pos.

B-flat major

B-flat major

23.

mein's
my

Le - - - bens
Life _____ and

Licht,
Light,

- - - bens Licht,
and Light,

o Je - - - su
o Je - - - su

Licht,
Light

o Je - su
o Je - su

Christ, mein's Le -
Christ, my Life

Je - su - Christ, mein's
Je - su - Christ, my

Le - - - bens
Life _____ and

23

B-flat major

F major

G7

BWV 118

27.

Alto crosses above cantus firmus.

Christ, mein's Le - - - bens Licht,
 Christ, my Life and Light,

- - - - - bens Licht,
 and Light,

Licht, mein's Le - - - bens Licht,
 Light, my Life and Light, Lituo I & II

C minor

C minor C pedal...

Line 2 alludes to biblical passages that refer to God as refuge and confidence (e.g., Psalm 94:22: The Lord has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge).

32.

mein my Hort, Help, mein my

mein my Hort, Help, mein my

mein my Hort, Help,

Lit II The litui accompany chorale line 2 (2 independent lines, see full score).

C minor

B-flat major

C(7)

F major

F7

G minor

(C7)

Ascending diatonic fourth (for significance, see note).

37.

Trost, Strength, mein' my Zu Rock ver of

Trost, Strength, mein' my Zu Rock ver of

mein my Hort, Help, mein my Trost, Strength, mein' my Zu Rock ver of

mein my Hort, Help, mein my Trost, Strength, mein' my Zu Rock ver of

F major

41.

sicht, Might, *Alto crosses above cantus firmus.* sicht, mein' Hort, mein' Trost, mein' Zu ver sicht, Might,

sicht, Might, mein' my Hort, Help, mein' my Strength, my Rock of

mein my Hort, Help, mein' my Zu ver sicht, Might,

sicht, Might, mein my Hort, mein' my Trost, Strength, mein' my Zu Rock ver of sicht, Might,

F(7) B-flat major F pedal...

BWV 118

Line 3 alludes to Psalm 119:19: I am a sojourner on earth (Luther 1545: Ich bin ein Gast auf Erden).

45.

In lines 3 & 4 the cantus firmus is prepared by the lower 3 parts with imitative counterpoint (much longer for line 4) derived from the chorale phrase.

auf on Er - den Earth naught
bin ich am I

The luti fall silent for the first part of chorale line 3.

F major F7 B-flat major G major

50.

auf on Er - den Earth naught bin ich am I
nur ein Gast, nur ein Gast, auf Er - den Earth naught
but a guest, but a guest, on Earth

auf on Er - den bin ich
Earth naught am I

C minor D7 G minor B-flat major

[illegible]

60.

Gast, bin ich nur ein Gast, guest, am I but a guest, bin ich, bin ich nur ein Gast, am I, am I but a guest, Gast, bin ich nur ein Gast, guest, am I but a guest, guest,

F minor F major F7 B-flat major C7

65.

und
By

65

F(7) B-flat major G7 C minor F7 B-flat major

Line 4 alludes to Psalm 38:4: My iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me (Luther 1545: Meine Sünden gehen über mein Haupt, wie eine schwere Last sind sie mir zu schwer worden).

70.

The fore-imitation for this chorale phrase is much longer, giving it considerably greater weight.

drückt mich sehr der Sün- den
Sin's great bur - - - - - den Sore op - - -

und By drückt mich sehr der
Sin's great bur - - - - - den

The luti fall silent in the fore-imitation to chorale line 4, but then re-enter intermittently with the cantus firmus.

70

B-flat major C7 D7 G minor C7 F major F7

BWV 118

74.

und *By* drückt *Sin's* mich *great* sehr *bur-* den

Last, der Sün- den Last, und drückt mich sehr der
pressed, yea, sore op- pressed, by Sin's great bur- den

Sün- den Last, und drückt mich sehr der
Sore op- pressed, by Sin's great bur- den

B-flat major C major F major F7 B-flat major F# dim.7

Martin Petzoldt suggests that, by withholding the entrance of the litui until the cantus firmus is heard, Bach here modifies their symbolic significance (with their repeated notes) to represent and emphasize the burden of sin referenced in the text. See *Bach-Kommentar* 3:577.

78.

und *By* drückt *Sin's* mich *great*

Sün- den Last, und drückt mich sehr der Sün- den Last, und drückt mich sehr der
Sore op- pressed, by Sin's great bur- den Sün- den Last, und drückt mich sehr der
Sore op- pressed, by Sin's great bur- den

Sün- den Last, und drückt mich sehr der Sün- den Last, und drückt mich sehr der
Sore op- pressed, by Sin's great bur- den Sün- den Last, und drückt mich sehr der
Sore op- pressed, by Sin's great bur- den

G minor F major F7 B-flat major G7

Ascending chromatic fourth, signifying the building pressure of sin's burden. For more, see note.

82.

sehr der Sün - den
bur - den Sore op -

sehr der Sün - den Last, und drückt
bur - den Sore op - pressed, by Sin's by Sin's

- den Last, und drückt mich sehr der Sün - den
op - pressed, by Sin's great bur - den Sore op -

Sün - den Last, und drückt mich sehr der
Sore op - pressed, by Sin's great bur - den

Ascending chromatic fourth in bass (see note above).

A minor B-flat major D7 E-flat major C7 F major D(7)

86.

Last, pressed.

- mich sehr der Sün - den Last, der Sün - den Last.
- great bur - den Sore op - pressed, yea, Sore op - pressed.

Last, pressed, der Sün - den Last.
yea, Sore op - pressed.

Sün - den Last, der Sün - den Last.
Sore op - pressed, yea, Sore op - pressed.

G minor B-flat major B-flat 7 E-flat major E-flat major

dal segno ad libitum
B-flat major, B-flat pedal...

BWV 118

91

= m. 2. = m. 3. = m. 4. = m. 5. = m. 6.

B-flat major F7 B-flat major G7

96

= m. 7. = m. 8. = m. 9. = m. 10.

C7 F major F pedal... F7 B-flat major (C7)

100

= m. 11. = m. 12. = m. 13. = m. 14.

F(7) B-flat 7 G7 C minor F7

104

= m. 15. = m. 16. = m. 17. = m. 18. = m. 19a.

B-flat major A-flat major B-flat 7 (E-flat major) E-flat major E dim.7 C major B-flat major B-flat major