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NBA I/26; BC A157

22. S. after Trinity (BWV 89, 115, 55)

\*Phillipians 1:3–11 (Paul's prayer for the church at Philippi)

\*Matthew 18:23–35 (The parable of the unforgiving servant)

Librettist: Unknown; Presumably Christoph Birkmann (see note).

FP: 17 November 1726 (St. Thomas) from Cycle III (see note).

Regarding the origins of the work, see note.

There are only 12 extant church cantatas for solo voice (Soprano: 51, 52, 84, 199; Alto: 35, 54, 169, 170, 200; Tenor: 55; Bass: 56, 82). Bach probably chose the tenor voice for Cantata 55 because the day's Gospel reading relates the story of Peter asking Jesus how many times he must forgive his brother, whereupon Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant who had been forgiven much. Martin Petzoldt outlines the cantata's symmetrical structure ("Bach-Kommentar" 1:628):

3. T. Aria. Repentance makes one call for mercy.

2. T. Recit. Flight from God 4. T. Recit. Turning to God

1. T. Aria. God is just, I am unjust.

5. Choral. God's grace is greater than my sin.

J.S. Bach

## Cantata No. 55

## Ich armer Mensch, ich Sündenknecht

55/1. • Fear of judgment: I recognize my sin (55/1).

## 1. (Aria)

Exchanges between 2 woodwinds & 2 violins (in 6ths and 3rds) are like an internal conversation. See side note.

Ritornello

Bach sometimes uses oscillating figures to depict vacillation (see side note).

G minor

D pedal...

The libretto is in the first person throughout, making the cantata individualistic and personal. It has been associated with the voice of Peter, who is a central figure in the day's Gospel reading and who "wept bitterly" in repentance after denying Jesus in the Passion account. The vocal range is very high, intensifying the overall effect.

Fl. trav.  
Ob. d'amore  
Viol. I/II  
Continuo

Instrumentation:  
Flauto traverso  
Oboe/Oboe d'amore (see note)  
Vln I, II  
Vla  
SATB  
Continuo

The throbbing/undulating rhythm in compound meter and minor mode is reminiscent of the opening of the St. Matthew Passion, portraying an attitude of lament. "The refrains within the text made it possible to conflate elements of da capo form with rounded binary form." (David Schulenberg in "Oxford Composer Companions. J. S. Bach," 225). The rising lines suggest increasing anxiety, perhaps also "heaped up sins" (see side note for possible biblical allusion).

G minor

G minor G7 C minor D7

In the introduction to the Carus edition of BWV 55, Felix Loy, with translation by David Kosviner) writes, "In the first movement, right away the four instrumental parts in the same high register (without viola) are combined with the, at times, extremely high range of the tenor voice to create a dense musical texture which, reinforced by frequent chromaticism, depicts with equal vividness the 'tangle of sins' and the fervid, albeit ineffective attempts of the sinner to escape them." See *Johann Sebastian Bach. The Sacred Vocal Music Complete Edition. Cantatas and Motets* (Stuttgart: Carus Verlag, 2017), vol. 5, p. 10 (Felix Loy, translation by David Kosviner).

G minor

E-flat major  
G minor G7 C minor F# dim.7 D7 G minor

Allusion to Jesus words in John 8:34: "...Every one who commits sin is a slave to sin (Luther 1545: der sünden knecht)." Indirect allusion also to the day's Gospel reading, Matthew 18:23–26: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So The servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'"

For biblical background, see note.



17 **tenore**

6-part texture

**Ich ar. mer Mensch, ich Sün. den knecht,**  
*Poor wretched man, a slave of sin,*

High tessitura for tenor and a chromatic line, suggesting desperation.

**ich**  
*poor*

This type of aria is called a "Devisenarie" (a term coined by Hugo Riemann) or "motto aria." After the ritornello, the singer presents the first phrase of the aria as a kind of motto. This is followed by a short instrumental bridge before the aria proper begins. The motto sets the tone (and the literary perspective) for the movement.

G minor G minor G7 D minor A7 D7 G minor

22

8 **ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den knecht, ich Sün. den knecht, ich**  
*wretch - ed man, a slave of sin, a slave of sin, poor*

G minor E-flat major G7 C minor D7

27

8 **ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den knecht!**  
*wretched man, a slave of sin.*

G minor E-flat major C# dim.7 A7 D major D minor B-flat major D minor

(For the significance of D minor, see side note.)



32

Text painting: Chromaticism for "I appear before God with fear and trembling."

Ich ar - mer Mensch, ich Sünden-knecht,  
 Poor wretched man, a slave of sin,

A7 F# dim.7 G minor G# dim.7 A7

37

ich ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den-knecht, ich Sün-den-  
 poor wretch - ed man, a slave of sin, a slave of

D minor D minor B-flat major D7 G minor

42

Very long, difficult passage,  
rising to high B-flat...

knecht, ich ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den-knecht, ich geh' vor  
 sin, poor wretched man, a slave of sin, be - fore God's

A7 D minor B-flat major G# dim.7 E7 A major D minor  
 A pedal...

"Vokaleinbau"

47

8 Got - tes An - ge - sich - te mit Furcht und Zit - tern  
 judg - ment seat I place me, with awe and tremb - ling,

"Vokaleinbau" (voice inserted into instrumental fabric of the ritornello)

D7 G minor A7

52

8 zum Ge - rich - te; ich ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den - knecht, ich geh' vor Got - tes An - ge -  
 fears a - base me. Poorwretched man, a slave of sin, be - fore God's judg - ment seat I

(Cembalo)

D minor B-flat major D minor D7 G minor E-flat major F7 D minor E half dim.7

Descending chromatic line for "with fear and trembling into judgment" (cf. mm. 117-118).

57

8 sich - te mit Furcht und Zit - tern zum Ge - rich - te.  
 place me, with awe and tremb - ling fears a - base me.

Ritornello. Role of instruments is reversed.

C# dim.7 F# dim.7 G minor A7 D minor (D minor) A major D minor B-flat major G# dim.7

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62

C# dim.7 G minor A major D minor  
A pedal...

67

Tenore

Er ist ge-  
Un-just, can

D minor D7 G minor C# dim.7 (A major) D minor D (minor)

72

Diminished 7th chord for "unjust/unrighteous."

recht, ich un - ge - recht, \_\_\_\_\_ er ist ge - recht, ich un - ge -  
I His ju - stice win? \_\_\_\_\_ Un-just, can I His ju - stice

F major F7 F# dim.7 F# dim.7 D7 G minor B-flat major B-flat 7



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Diminished 7th chord for "unjust/unrighteous."

77

8

recht, \_\_\_\_\_  
win? \_\_\_\_\_

ich ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den - knecht,  
Poor wretched man, a slave of sin,

B dim.7 G7 C minor A-flat major C minor

82

8

ich ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den - knecht, ich  
poor wretched man, a slave of sin, poor

G7 E dim.7 F minor F# dim.7 B minor G7 C minor

"Vokaleinbau"

87

8

ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den - knecht, ich Sün - den - knecht, - ich  
wretch - ed man, a slave of sin, a slave of sin, - poor

"Vokaleinbau" (voice inserted into instrumental fabric of the ritornello)

C minor A-flat major C7 F minor G7

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92

ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den - knecht! Er ist ge - recht, ich un - ge - recht,  
wretched man, a slave of sin. Unjust, can I His ju - stice win?

C minor A-flat major D7 G major C(7) F minor E dim.7

97

er ist ge - recht, ich un - ge - recht, ich  
Un - just, can I His ju - stice win? Poor

F minor D(7) G minor F# dim.7 F# dim.7 D7

102

ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den - knecht. Er ist ge - recht, ich un - ge -  
wretched man, a slave of sin. Un - just, can I His ju - stice

G minor G7 C# dim.7 D(7) G minor D(7) G minor D pedal...

107

8  
recht, ich ar - mer Mensch, ich Sünden.knecht, ich ar - mer Mensch, ich Sünden.knecht, ich  
win? Poor wretched man, a slave of sin, poor wretched man, a slave of sin, a

D(7) G minor D7 G minor G7 C minor D7

112

8  
Sün - den.knecht, ich ar - mer Mensch, ich Sünden. slave of sin, poor wretched man, a slave of

G minor E-flat major G minor G7 C minor A-flat major B-flat 7 G minor A-flat major

Descending chromatic line for "with fear and trembling into judgment" (cf. mm. 57–58).

117

8  
knecht, ich ar - mer Mensch, ich Sün - den - knecht! sin, poor wretch - ed man, a slave of sin.

F# dim.7 G7 C minor D7 C# dim.7 (G minor) D7 G minor Dal Segno



55/2. Secco

## 2. Recitativo • Fear of judgment: My sin is great, where can I flee? (55/2).

Tenore

Chromatic saturation in the vocal part in 9 mm.

For biblical background, see note.

Ich ha - be wi - der Gott ge - han - delt, und bin dem - sel - ben  
I have a - gainst the just God o - ffen - ded and from the path - way

High tessitura for tenor suggests desperation.

Text painting: "acted against God" depicted with clash of D-flat against C.

Continuo

Secco

Against C

C minor (for the significance of C, see side note).

E dim.7

Allusion to scriptures such as Deuteronomy 5:33: You shall walk in all the way which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live...

Pfad, den er mir vor - ge - schrie - ben hat, nicht nach - ge - wan - delt. Wo -  
strayed which for me had been plan - ned and laid, nor Him at - tend - ed. Where

Against C

F minor

G7

C minor

Allusion to Psalm 139:7-12: [O Lord,] whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol (Luther 1545: Hölle), thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Let only darkness cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with thee.

hin! soll ich der Mor - gen - rö - te Flü - gel zu mei - ner Flucht er - kie - sen, die mich zum  
'scape? Shall I, the wings of mor - ning tak - ing, to co - ward flight be - take me? or in the

Text painting: Rising fast notes for fleeing from God.

A7

D minor

letz - ten Mee - re wie - sen: so wird mich doch die Hand des Al - ler - höch - sten  
dephts of o - cean hide me? There al - so shall the hand of God Al - migh - ty

F7

D7

F# dim.7

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9  
8  
fin-den, und mir die Sün-den ru-te bin-den. Ach ja! Wenn gleich die Höll' ein  
find me, and for my sins chastise me just-ly. In truth, should hell it-self close

G minor G minor G7

12  
8  
Bet-te für mich und mei-ne Sün-den hät-te, so wä-re doch der Grimm des Höchsten da.  
o'er me, still could His vengeance there o'er-take me, still thence from Him in ter-ror must I fly.

NBA: vor

C7 E dim.7 F minor B-flat minor G-flat major B-flat minor C major

Apparent allusion to Numbers 16:31-34: As [Moses] finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split asunder; and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men that belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol (Luther 1545: Hölle); and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. And all Israel that were round about them fled at their cry; for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up!"

15  
8  
Die Er-de schützt mich nicht, sie droht mich Schen-sal zu ver-  
The earth pro-ects me not; nay, nay, it quick en-gulfs the

F major F7 B dim.7

Apparent allusion to Deuteronomy 28:15, 37: If you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you... And you shall become a horror (Luther 1545: Scheusal), a proverb, and a byword, among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you away.

17  
8  
schlingen; und will ich mich zum Himmel schwingen, da wohnet Gott, der mir das Ur-teil spricht.  
sin-ner. And if to hea-ven I should ven-ture, God dwelleth there and threatens vengeance hot.

High B-flat suggests terror.

C minor D7 G minor E-flat major A7 D minor D minor

The wide tenor range reflects the extreme lengths of contemplated escape, a continued allusion to Psalm 139:7-12: [O Lord,] whither shall I go from thy Spirit?..."

"Here...we find the gesture of beseeching, which is musically represented by a rising leap of a sixth and then a falling step of a second, by expressive, virtuoso flute passage-work, and by the frequent use of the Neapolitan-sixth chord." (Dürr/Jones, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, 619).

55/3. ●Prayer: Have mercy on me, a sinner, for Jesus' sake (55/3). This movement may have originated earlier—the manuscript score shows it to have been entered as a fair copy.

Flauto traverso

### 3. Aria

Ritornello derived from vocal opening.

Intricate flute part, perhaps representing the tears referenced in the text.

N6 B-flat major (D minor) A7  
D minor (for significance of D minor, see note at movement 1).

(D7) D7 G minor C7 F major

The call for mercy, "Erbarme dich" (with which the both sections of the aria begin, as well as the text of the following recitative) presumably alludes to the Gospel reading of the day, Matthew 18:26: "The servant fell on his knees, imploring [his master], "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." Alfred Dürr refers to the "ever-changing melodic garb of the words 'Erbarme dich,' [extending] into the following movement." (Dürr/Jones, 619).

### Tenore

Felix Loy, with translation by David Kosviner) writes, "The second aria is characterized by the exclamatio figure, an ascending minor sixth symbolizing a fervent entreaty for mercy. The extremely virtuosic and expressive flute part lends heightened intensity to this entreaty." See *Johann Sebastian Bach. The Sacred Vocal Music Complete Edition. Cantatas and Motets* (Stuttgart: Carus Verlag, 2017), vol. 5, p. 10 (Felix Loy, translation by David Kosviner).

Er -  
Have

For biblical background, see note.

Exclamatio

bar - me dich,  
mer - cy, Lord!

er - bar.me dich,  
Have mer.cy Lord,

er - bar -  
Have mer -

N6 B-flat major (D minor) A7 D minor N6 B-flat major

- me, er.bar - me dich, laß die Trä - nen dich er - wei - chen, laß sie  
- cy, have mer - cy! Look with pi - ty on my cry - ing, let Thy

G minor A major D major D7 G minor

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12

8

dir zu Her-zen rei-chen, er-bar-  
heart re-gard my sigh-ing, have mer-

C(7) F major D minor B-flat major

14

8

- me, er-bar-me dich!  
- cy, have mer-cy, Lord!

Ritornello

G# dim.7 A minor A minor N6 F major

17

8

A major A7 D minor G major G7 C major

19

8

Er -  
Have

D minor B-flat major G# dm.7 A minor A major A7



# J.S. Bach - Church Cantatas BWV 55

21  
8 bar - me - dich, er - bar - me, er. bar. me dich, laß, um  
mer - cy, Lord, have mer - cy, have mer. cy, Lord, and for

D minor G minor

24  
8 Je - su Chri - sti wil - len, dei - nen Zorn des Ei - fers stil - len; er -  
Je - su's sake, Who loved me, turn Thy hea - vy an - ger from me! Have  
Harmonic ambiguity with extreme chromaticism for plea that God would quiet his anger for Christ's sake.

G minor F minor F7 (G7) C minor F# dim.7 G minor

26  
8 bar me dich, er. bar. me dich, er - bar. me dich!  
mer. cy, Lord, have mer. cy, Lord, have mer. cy, Lord!

Ritornello

C minor G minor N6 E-flat major B-flat major

29  
8 Laß, um Je - su Chri - sti wil - len, dei - nen Zorn des Ei - fers stil - len; er - bar - me  
And for Je - su's sake, Who loved me, turn Thy hea - vy an - ger from me! Have mer - cy,

D major G minor G7 C major D minor B-flat major G7 A major N6 D minor



# J.S. Bach - Church Cantatas BWV 55

32

8

dich, er - bar - me dich, er - bar - me dich, er -  
 Lord, have mer - cy, Lord, have mer - cy, Lord, have

B-flat major A7 D minor D minor B-flat major D7

34

8

bar - me, er - bar - me dich!  
 mer - cy, have mer - cy, Lord!

G minor D minor N6 D minor D minor D minor N6 B-flat major

Ritornello

37

8

(D minor) A major D7 G minor

39

8

C7 F major G minor E-flat major D minor D minor D minor

The opening "Erbarme dich" (which also begins both sections of the previous aria) presumably alludes to the Gospel reading for the Gospel reading, Matthew 18:26: The servant fell on his knees, imploring, "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." Compare the motive with "Erbarm es Gott" in the St. Matthew Passion.

55/4.

## 4. Recitativo

• Atonement: In judgment I plead Christ's saving work (55/4).

This movement may have originated earlier.

After the initial prayer for mercy, the poet continues with a self-exhortation rich in theological references, including a reminder that Christ paid for sins (reminiscent of Jesus' parable in the Gospel reading, in which the king pays his servant's impossibly large debt) and of passages such as Hebrews 4:14–16, which explains Christ's advocacy on behalf of humans before God the Father (see side note). The high vocal tessitura adds intensifies the effect.

**Tenore** B-flat A-flat G F B D E-flat

Er - bar - me dich! Je - doch nun tröst ich mich, ich  
Have mer - cy, Lord! See, hope's to me restor - ed! 'Tis

Sustained strings suggest solace and reassurance.

"Halo" of strings.

Vocal saturation in the vocal part in 7 mm.

B-flat major (The mood is now positive. See side note.) B-flat 7 G7 C minor

For biblical background, see note.

3 C F# A

will nicht vor Ge - rich - te ste - hen, und lie - ber vor den Gna - den - thron zu mei - nem  
not to judgment I'll be - take me, but ra - ther at God's throne of grace be - fore my

NBA: für NBA: dem

D7 G minor

Possible allusion to the prodigal son, who said, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.'" (Luke 15:18).

5 E C#

frommen Va - ter ge - hen. Ich halt ihm sei - nen Sohn, sein Lei - den, sein Er - lö - sen  
Fa - ther will I place me. There Je - su's love I'll tell, His Pas - sion, His a - tone - ment

F# dim.7 G minor G minor (C# dim.7) A7

8

vor, wie er für mei - ne Schuld be - zah - let und ge - nug ge - tan, und bitt ihn um Ge -  
rare, that paid my hea - vy debt, that cleansed and can redemption win. God's pa - tience will I

NBA: für

D minor B-flat major B-flat 7 G7

11

duld: hin - fü - ro will ichs nicht mehr tun. So nimmt mich Gott zu Gna - den wie - der an.  
beg. Hen - ce forth 'gainst Him I'll not sin, and neap - ly God to grace will take me in.

Text painting: Harmonic turn for repentance.

C minor F minor B-flat 7 E-flat major F7 B-flat major B-flat major

The closing chorale acts as a catechismal response by the congregation. The simplicity of its setting suggests a child-like faith and assurance.  
Compare the setting of this same stanza in the St. Matthew Passion.

•Prayer of repentance, returning to God (55/5). This is the 6th stanza of 12 in the 1642 chorale "Werde munter, mein Gemüte" by Johann Rist (1607–1667).

## 55/5. 5. Choral

The reference to turning back to God is reminiscent of Jesus' statement in Matthew 18:3: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

+Flauto traverso,  
Oboe, Vln I

+Vln II

+Vla

For biblical  
background,  
see note.



Fl. trav.  
Ob.  
Viol. I/II  
Va.  
Continuo

**Soprano**  
Bin ich gleich von dir ge - wi - chen, stell ich mich doch wie - der ein,  
Once in sin from Thee I part - ed, now I seek Thy face a - gain.

**Alto**  
Bin ich gleich von dir ge - wi - chen, stell ich mich doch wie - der ein,  
Once in sin from Thee I part - ed, now I seek Thy face a - gain.

**Tenore**  
Bin ich gleich von dir ge - wi - chen, stell ich mich doch wie - der ein,  
Once in sin from Thee I part - ed, now I seek Thy face a - gain.

**Basso**  
Bin ich gleich von dir ge - wi - chen, stell ich mich doch wie - der ein,  
Once in sin from Thee I part - ed, now I seek Thy face a - gain.

*col' octava ad libitum*

B-flat major

B-flat major

B-flat major

5 The reference to Christ's atoning sacrifice, reconciling sinners with God, connects this chorale stanza to the previous movement.

**Soprano**  
hat uns doch dein Sohn ver - gli - chen, durch sein Angst und To - des - pein.  
For Thy son, so lov - ing heart - ed, now me grace through His sore pain.

**Alto**  
hat uns doch dein Sohn ver - gli - chen, durch sein Angst und To - des - pein.  
For Thy son, so lov - ing heart - ed, now me grace through His sore pain.

**Tenore**  
hat uns doch dein Sohn ver - gli - chen, durch sein Angst und To - des - pein.  
For Thy son, so lov - ing heart - ed, now me grace through His sore pain.

**Basso**  
hat uns doch dein Sohn ver - gli - chen, durch sein Angst und To - des - pein.  
For Thy son, so lov - ing heart - ed, now me grace through His sore pain.

B-flat major

B-flat major

B-flat major

9

Ich ver-leug-ne nicht die Schuld, a-ber dei-ne Gnad und Huld  
Nought of mine the debt can pay, but God's love can sin out-weigh.

Ich ver-leug-ne nicht die Schuld, a-ber dei-ne Gnad und Huld  
Nought of mine the debt can pay, but God's love can sin out-weigh.

Ich ver-leug-ne nicht die Schuld, a-ber dei-ne Gnad und Huld  
Nought of mine the debt can pay, but God's love can sin out-weigh.

Ich ver-leug-ne nicht die Schuld, a-ber dei-ne Gnad und Huld  
Nought of mine the debt can pay, but God's love can sin out-weigh.

G7 C minor C minor C minor B-flat 7 E-flat major E-flat major

13

ist viel grö-ßer als die Sün-de, die ich stets in mir be-fin-de.  
Strong and sure it fails us ne-ver, mine it is and shall be e-ver.

ist viel grö-ßer als die Sün-de, die ich stets in mir be-fin-de.  
Strong and sure it fails us ne-ver, mine it is and shall be e-ver.

ist viel grö-ßer als die Sün-de, die ich stets in mir be-fin-de.  
Strong and sure it fails us ne-ver, mine it is and shall be e-ver.

ist viel grö-ßer als die Sün-de, die ich stets in mir be-fin-de.  
Strong and sure it fails us ne-ver, mine it is and shall be e-ver.

G minor B-flat major B-flat major B-flat major