

“Erschallet, ihr Lieder, erklinget ihr Saiten!”

A study of Bach's third Weimar cantata and the spirituality
of his musical language

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J.S. Bach's third Weimar cantata is described by John Eliot Gardiner as being one that he "evidently ... particularly valued."¹ Besides Bach's repeated reworkings and reinstrumentations of the piece (for later performances in Leipzig) that would suggest this, the piece also clearly grew out of a fortuitous intersection in his liturgical career—working in Weimar, a hotbed for both secular and sacred composition with ample resources to realize his musical visions and the masterful librettist Salomo Franck at his disposal. From the ebullient occasion for which it was composed, to its rich instrumentation, to its relentless cascade of Bach-ian symbolism, "Erschallet, ihr Lieder, erklinget, ihr Saiten!" ("Resound, you songs, ring out, you strings!") represents a peak in the composer's liturgical canon.

Context and Instrumentation

"Erschallet..." was written for the service of *Whitsunday* ("White Sunday"), a high-spirited celebration for the festival of Pentecost, which commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon early Christians in the time following Jesus' resurrection. It is worth noting that, in the Lutheran tradition of Bach's time, the festival would have carried the same celebratory circumstance as Christmas or Easter; Gardiner describes it as "the culmination of those 'great fifty days' which follow the resurrection, a watershed marking the completion of Jesus' work on earth and the coming of the Holy Spirit."² The cantata's music is a testimony to this in its use of a trumpet choir and timpani (one does not usually appear without the other), placing it a category of Bach's most exultant repertoire that includes his Christmas cantatas and oratorios (including the famous BWV 248), his Easter oratorio BWV 249, and a host of secular cantatas for

¹ Gardiner, John Eliot, "Cantatas Nos 34, 59, 68, 74, 172, 173 & 174," Hyperion Records, accessed November 26, 2018, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dc.asp?dc=D_SDG121.

² Ibid.

weddings, birthdays, and inaugurations.³ Julian Mincham, in fact, remarks on the “secular” sound of BWV 172’s opening chorus⁴—perhaps in light of the abundance of secular cantatas employing this instrumental device—echoed by Gardiner, who suggests that the cantata alludes not only to the exuberance of Pentecost, but also to pre-Christian festivities surrounding the turning of the agricultural year.⁵

In comparing these celebratory works, we also find a curious sub-genre of works with music-centric titles. An early Leipzig cantata, BWV 207 “Vereinigte Zwietracht der wechselnden Saiten” (translated by Richard Stokes as “United dischord of quievering strings”), makes use of the same trumpet-timpani ensemble, as well as the typical exultant, triple-metered opening chorus we find in virtually all works of this type. A much later reworking of BWV 207—BWV 207a—bears the title of “Auf, schmetternde Töne der muntern Trompeten” (“Come, resounding tones of merry trumpets”); around the same time, we find BWV 214 “Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten!” (“Resound, you drums! Ring out, you Trumpets!”), which, of course, features the festive opening chorus that would later be employed in BWV 248 with Picander’s lyrics of “Jauchzet, frohlocket!” (not as music-centric a chorus as the others mentioned here, but related by way of its command to raise one’s voices in praise and song). It is of interest that BWV 172 “Erschallet, ihr Lieder...” dates back well before any of these aforementioned Leipzig cantatas, making it the earliest instance of a cantata to feature a chorus

³ “Bach’s Compositions using trumpets or horns with timpani,” Bach Cantatas Website, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Topics/Trumpet-List.htm>.

⁴ Mincham, Julian, “Chapter 57 BWV 172,” The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.jsbachcantatas.com/documents/chapter-57-bwv-172/>.

⁵ Gardiner, John Eliot, “Cantatas Nos 34, 59, 68, 74, 172, 173 & 174,” Hyperion Records, accessed November 26, 2018, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dc.asp?dc=D_SDG121.

of this type. We can imagine that the “sounding instruments” chorus, as one might call it, was a thematic cliché that Bach relished and developed, beginning with BWV 172 and culminating in (or at least extending to) BWV 248.

In terms of libretto, we can attribute BWV 172’s “Erschallet...” declaration to Salomo Franck. Records show that Franck may have even penned an earlier, now-lost, secular New Year’s cantata, “Erschallet nun wieder, glückwünschende Lieder,”⁶ which, if also set by Bach, may mean that some of BWV 172’s movements had a secular-sacred evolution similar to that of BWV 248’s “Jauchzet...”. In the case of subsequent cantatas in the “sounding instruments” genre, such as BWVs 207, 207a, and 214, the librettist is less certain—possibly Picander, or even Bach himself, drawing inspiration from Franck’s text for BWV 172.

Composition

The fanfare quality of the opening chorus has already been discussed at length—comparable with some of Bach’s most celebratory works both secular and sacred. The first bars of music that we hear outline the theme that pervades the movement much like a ritornello; indeed, we will observe many elements in Bach’s writing from this time that are no doubt owed to his exposure to Italian repertoire in Weimar. Of note is how the chorus’ statements of the “ritornello” closely resemble the contour and phrase structure of its equivalent in “Jauchzet, frohlocket!” from BWV 248 (and consequently in BWV 214), further unifying the aforementioned “sub-genre” to which these works belong.

Right from the onset of this first movement, the theme of triplicity (which we will soon find pervades the cantata) is clearly introduced—the firmly defined triple metre; the three-part trumpet choir (whose parts largely maintain their independence); the overarching three-part

⁶ Kilian, Dietrich, *Erschallet, ihr Lieder BWV 172*, (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1965), Preface.

instrumentation of trumpets, strings, and choir; and the frequent use of three-note rhythmic motifs. For ever-symbolic Bach, these elements paint a subliminal portrait of the Holy Trinity that is of particular importance for this season of Pentecost. Rolling harmonic sequences on the cantata's eponymous six words once again conjure suggestions of Italian concertos. A striking "breath" is taken from the running vocal lines to dwell on "seligste Zeiten" ("blessed times") in an interlude between ritornellos.

The following middle section employs a fughetta on "Gott will sich die Seelen zu Tempeln bereiten" ("God wants to prepare our souls to be his temples") with a typical Bachian word-painting device—the voices enter in order from lowest to highest, then in the opposite order in the restatement, gesticulating a bridging of heaven and earth. We imagine this intention based on other works with even more blatant musical imagery—such as the chorus of BWV 61, which commences with a slow presentation of the chorale tune in each voice from highest to lowest on the text "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland" ("Now come, the heathen's saviour," from heaven to earth, and therefore from soprano to bass). In a breathless stretto, the word "bereiten" ("to prepare") receives the longest melismas in the movement, as though this were, to Bach, the climactic concept of the text. A *da capo* instruction concludes the movement with a restatement of the "Erschallet" chorus, establishing a neat ternary form—more triplicity, and also of the Italian variety.

We can skip ahead and find a more unusual *da capo* at the end of the cantata—"Chorus repetatur ab initio," an instruction to repeat the opening chorus. Not only does this create a ternary triplicity of the largest scale possible, it establishes a microcosmic-macrocosmic relationship between the chorus and the work overall. Similar patterns occur in the cantata's thematic structure: other writers have noted that its movements progress from dealing with the

Pentecostal theme from an external perspective to a more inward, intimate one,⁷ which again is reflected in the “Erschallet...” chorus—the external, even secular, fanfare bookending an intimate middle section that deals with “God’s [preparation of] our souls.” In another footnote of triplicity, even the principal key of each movement shows a pattern of descending thirds (from C major, to A minor, to F major). This masterful thematic balance no doubt satisfied Bach’s thirst for musical order, and is perhaps one of the many reasons why he seemed to value the work as much as he did.

The second movement’s bass recitative (the only recitative of the cantata) sets John 14:23 (“Wer mich liebet, der wird mein Wort halten,” in English, “Who loves me will keep my words”), likely one of the readings of the service for which the work was written. The text is one Bach was musically familiar with, and one that was probably quite meaningful to him; BWVs 59 and 74 both feature the passage eponymously, and both in a setting much more exultant than what we see here. A superficial interpretation is that the settings in BWVs 59 and 74 place more focus on the bestowment of Divine love (“...and my Father will love him, and we shall come unto him...”), where BWV 172’s recitative employs the trope of the *vox Christi* (a solo bass voice being used to portray the voice of Christ), and seems more concerned with the idea of peacefully “abiding” with God—an image driven home by its ending on what is possibly the lowest note Bach ever wrote for a singer, a C2 (D2 in the transposed version performed in Leipzig). The only vestige of exuberance comes in the extended melismas that are suddenly introduced at the mention of “und Wohnung bei ihm machen” (“[and he will] make our dwelling with him”), joined by a joyful fluttering of demisemiquavers in the continuo. Though the

⁷ Gardiner, John Eliot, “Cantatas Nos 34, 59, 68, 74, 172, 173 & 174,” Hyperion Records, accessed November 26, 2018, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dc.asp?dc=D_SDG121.

recitative begins authoritatively in A minor, we see a “resolution” to the relative major by the end, in support of Bach’s word painting.

The following bass aria sees the *vox Christi* transformed into what Mincham describes as “the voice of humanity, praying for God to enter our hearts.” The text is Franck’s, following in the cantata’s pattern of increasing intimacy with its plea for the Holy Trinity to “komm doch in die Herzenshütten...komm und ziehe bei uns ein” (“come into our heart-shelters...come and move in with us”). The aria aptly picks up both textual theme and key (D major) from where the recitative left off. Trinitarian imagery is perhaps most dense of all here, with the return of the three-trumpet choir (and timpani) sounding a triadic theme that spreads contagiously into the continuo and the soloist’s line, weaving a continuous stretto without a second of silence intervening. Accordingly, the form is a ternary *da capo*.

The difficulty of the principal horn part in this movement cannot be understated—breathless cascades of demisemiquavers made all the more challenging on a natural horn. Neither is the leaping bass solo a walk in the park, though perhaps at least manageable when we assume that the singer must have been the same talent capable of sounding the C2 of the earlier movement. These matters of difficulty make certain suggestions about the calibre of the performers in the Weimar Kapelle. The “competence and versatility” of the ensemble there has been remarked upon; it is reported that town musicians, as well as choir boys from the town gymnasium, were often employed,⁸ suggesting a flexibility of ensemble size and a broad range of talent at Bach’s disposal. A decent quality control of performances was certainly kept, especially by 1714 (when about BWV 172 was written), when a directive by the Weimar court was issued for all new music to be rehearsed in the *Kirchen-Kapelle*, not the home of the

⁸ Wolff, Christoph, *Johann Sebastian Bach: the learned musician*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), chap. 6, Kindle.

Kapellmeister, as was formerly the case. Required to observe these rehearsals was both the Kapellmeister and the now-Konzertmeister Bach, who was implicitly given more authority (and quality control) in that musicians were now required to “appear at his demand.”⁹

BWV 172’s tenor aria “O Seelenparadies” (“O Paradise of Souls”) stands in greatest contrast to the rest of the cantata—as it should, being a structural centrepiece—with its minor mode and eerie chromatic melodies. Mincham speaks of its “primeval power,”¹⁰ which, though a little dramatically stated, is probably in reference to its long, shivering melismas (on “durchwehet,” “wafts through”) reminiscent of phrygian plainchant. If nothing else, this is a sound that alludes to something profound, ethereal, enigmatic. The flowing string counterpoint begs for some kind of programmatic interpretation; Mincham calls it “God’s Enabling Spirit,”¹¹ though a more general interpretation could simply be that this aria features more *Holy Ghost* than it does *Father* or *Son*. A subtler function of the ethereal string line is its unification of the work in spite of an unusual double B section—in a sense, a thematically contrasting C section presented in m. 77 urging listeners to “prepare themselves” for the Comforter, as any good Lutheran has no doubt been told many times before. For a moment, the declarative perfect-fourth leaps on “auf, auf” bear a striking resemblance to those sung on “Erschallet” in the opening chorus, casting a spiritual light on the earlier, secular fanfare.

The cantata’s final aria, “Komm, laß mich nicht länger warten” (“Come, let me wait no longer”), stands as the dramatic climax in the narrative of the inward journey that Gardiner and

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mincham, Julian, “Chapter 57 BWV 172,” *The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach*, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.jsbachcantatas.com/documents/chapter-57-bwv-172/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

Wolff describe. In this almost-operatic dialogue by Franck, a longing soul (soprano) cries for the Holy Spirit (alto) “not to be left waiting,” asserting its desire and necessity to be with the divine; the Holy Spirit responds with comforting affirmations of “Ich erquickte dich, mein Kind; Nimm von mir den Gnadenkuß; Ich bin dein, und du bist mein!” (“I refresh you, my child; Take me from the kiss of grace; I am yours and you are mine!”). The soprano line is notably quite high, likely as an aid to the metaphor of virtuous innocence; we can imagine this would likely have been performed by a boy soprano, adding a sense of fragility and naivety to the part that would be hard to replicate with a woman soprano in a modern performance. A third voice (as obligated by the Trinitarian theme) is supplied by an oboe d’amore sounding a highly embellished rendition of “Komm, heiliger Geist,” a Whitsun chorale. Both Gardiner and Mincham make note of how imperceptible the tune is in this setting, even to the chorale-trained Lutheran ears of Bach’s day; Mincham suggests its function as “an explicit symbol for God” that becomes “a subliminal message for Man.” It seems to harken back to an older Renaissance practice of dressing art with imperceptible complexities that may ultimately only find appreciation by the Divine and the mortal subconscious.

Structurally, this aria is the most indecipherable of the set—more through-composed than *da capo*, although, similar to the previous tenor aria, it is held together by a motivically consistent continuo line. Instrumentally, it is also the most sparse of the surrounding movements, certainly as a means of exposing the relentlessly winding vocal counterpoint. Also not unlike the strings in “O Seelenparadies,” the Holy Spirit represented by the alto line frequently crosses through the soprano’s, surrounding and embracing it totally. The lines maintain their independence with intense clarity throughout; there is almost a sense of stretto or imitation in the way they echo one another’s melodies and fill in each other’s silences. Their first moment of

rhythmic unity comes appropriately on “Liebste Liebe, die so süße / Nimm von mir den Gnadenkuß” (“Dearest love, who are so delightful” / “Take from me the kiss of grace”) where the lines form a brief duet in parallel sixths. The final unison conveys the obvious metaphor of the soul’s successful reunion with the Divine, a similar thematic resolution as to what we find at the end of the bass aria.

Gardiner has described the language of “Komm, laß mich nicht...” as “overtly erotic” and “pietistic.”¹² Indeed, Alfred Dürr makes note of the pietistic thinking represented in some of Franck’s work, though Franck himself “cannot be classified as a Pietist.”¹³ This association with Pietism stems from the intensely personal, almost romantically intimate, dynamic portrayed here—a non-orthodox dynamic that certainly would not have thrilled authorities in Leipzig, where the cantata was later performed again, and where reference to any school of thought other than that of Lutheran orthodoxy was expressly frowned upon.¹⁴ We can only assume that Franck was not overtly pietistic enough for his writings to be labeled as un- or anti-orthodox, but Bach’s relationship with this ideology is something we will continue to examine.

The final chorale sets the fourth verse of Philipp Nicolai’s famous hymn “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern” (“How lovely shines the morning star”), whose text entreats the Divine “Nimm mich / Freundlich / In dein Arme, daß ich warme werd von Gnaden...” (“Take me / Like a friend / In your arms, so that I may be warmed by your grace...”). In another footnote on Pietism, Dürr refers to Nicola’s text of “der Morgenstern” as being “an early

¹² Gardiner, John Eliot, “Cantatas Nos 34, 59, 68, 74, 172, 173 & 174,” Hyperion Records, accessed November 26, 2018, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dc.asp?dc=D_SDG121.

¹³ Dürr, Alfred, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Die Kantaten*, (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1999), 394

¹⁴ O Franklin, Don, “J. S. Bach and Pietism,” Pietistern, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.pietisten.org/viii/1/bach.html>.

example of the emotional, mystical basis from which Pietism was to develop.” Even in this, a straightforward chorale setting, Bach finds room for musical invention and dramatic devices. The harmonization, complex enough on its own, receives an added descant by the flute and first violin (Gardiner calls it a “fauxbordoun”¹⁵). The continuo and bass in the region of the final system (mm. 15-18) take off in a grand scalar swoop through the singers’ entire range in preparation for the final cadence on “Auf dein Wort komm ich geladen” (“To your word I come invited”). Going a step further, one could even interpret references to earlier thematic material: In m. 4, the triadic gesture in the descant bears a resemblance to the third aria’s accompaniment figure; if only on a subliminal level, the bass’ “grand swoop” feels in character with the cantata’s earlier uses of scalar runs as a representation of the flowing Holy Spirit.

Bach and Pietism

Though it seems a precise definition is hard to pin down, most writers appear to agree on a baseline description of 17th-18th-century Pietism as being a school of thought that placed more value on individual devotion and subjective emotion in the path to salvation, in divergence from Lutheran orthodoxy, which placed greater importance on congregational worship and scholastic study.¹⁶ In BWV 172 alone, we have already seen two songs that bear Pietistic ideologies, and whose authors’ works are more widely regarded as providing an early basis for the philosophies of Pietism. Bach, closet Pietist or not, certainly wholeheartedly engaged with these ideologies in his colourful musical settings, as we see particularly in the last two movements of BWV 172.

¹⁵ Gardiner, John Eliot, “Cantatas Nos 34, 59, 68, 74, 172, 173 & 174,” Hyperion Records, accessed November 26, 2018, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dc.asp?dc=D_SDG121.

¹⁶ Irwin, Joyce, “German Pietists and Church Music in the Baroque Age,” *Church History* 54, no. 1 (1985): 29-40, <http://www.jstor.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/stable/3165748>.

Taking just “Komm, laß mich nicht...” as an example: together with its intensely emotional nature, its saturation of musical imagery, and even a subliminal choral quotation, the aria leaves no doubt that Bach believed his music was made more effective by appealing to listeners’ emotional—or otherwise deeply personal—sensibilities. Other Bach cantatas play on Pietistic themes even more overtly, such as BWV 5 “Wo soll ich fliehen hin” (“Where shall I flee”), based on a text by borderline Pietist Johann Heerman, whose hymns’ fixation on sanguine imagery (that is, salvation through the blood of Christ, a pillar of Pietism), was embraced by Bach with the same compositional enthusiasm as we see in BWV 172. At least superficially, we can imagine that strict Lutheran orthodoxy would not have conceded to music having much function beyond conveying religious doctrine clearly and tastefully. There is no surprise, therefore, that the Leipzig orthodoxy took issue with Bach’s music for being too dramatic.

Of course, there exists no evidence that Bach ever considered himself to be a Pietist; on the contrary, he is more likely to have come in conflict with strict Pietistic doctrine that, in a Calvinistic vein, did not see music as serving any necessary function in the devotional equation.¹⁷ As Leo Schrade puts it, “Pietism had now become for Bach an idea which involved his own religious and artistic feelings, quite apart from all its outward implications.” Bach does not seem to have been alone in this selective adoption of Pietistic sentiments; Lutheran theologian Heinrich Müller similarly found stable philosophical ground between orthodoxy and Pietistic subjectivism, and is known to have championed music that appealed to a sense of spiritual individuality—his published hymnal “Geistliche Seelenmusik” (literally: “sacred soul-music”) is said to contain “songs for private devotion virtually indistinguishable in style from

¹⁷ Schrade, Leo, "Bach: The Conflict between the Sacred and the Secular," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 7, no. 2 (1946): 167. doi:10.2307/2707070.

operatic arias.”¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, many of Müller’s writings were found in Bach’s expansive library following the composer’s death—alongside other pietistically inclined writings, including those of “Father of Pietism” Philipp Spener.¹⁹

Naturally, Bach’s library doesn’t reveal much about his beliefs, only of his knowledge. Only when we consider this knowledge in tandem with his emotionally driven musical settings and with his beliefs about the importance of music in devotion, we obtain a clearer picture of Bach’s compositional intentions. A revealing artefact in Bach’s library known as the “Calov Bible” (so named because of its commentary by theologian Abraham Calov), features annotations by the composer himself on the subject of music and the Divine; this includes “...music especially has also been ordered into existence by God’s spirit through David,” penned alongside I Chronicles 28:21, and with II Chronicles 5:13-14, “in devotional music, God with his grace is always present.”²⁰ With these words, Bach seems to pin a divinely mystical quality to music of which Lutheran orthodoxy gives no implication on its own. When we imagine what *was* true music to Bach—as revealed in the compositional language of his cantatas—we can infer that he believed in the rousing of his listeners’ sensibilities, the provoking of their souls, as a means for attaining the divine unity so exalted in BWV 172.

¹⁸ Irwin, Joyce, "German Pietists and Church Music in the Baroque Age," *Church History* 54, no. 1 (1985): 39, <http://www.jstor.org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/stable/3165748>.

¹⁹ Schrade, Leo, "Bach: The Conflict between the Sacred and the Secular," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 7, no. 2 (1946): 167. doi:10.2307/2707070.

²⁰ O Franklin, Don, "J. S. Bach and Pietism," *Pietistern*, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.pietisten.org/viii/1/bach.html>.

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