

**Program Notes**  
San Jose Symphonic Choir  
November 26, 2022

***The Sacred Music of J. S. Bach***

*By Leroy Kromm, with quotes from*

*“The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach: A listener and student guide”  
by Julian Mincham*

Bach’s prolific number of sacred cantatas are based on the Lutheran lectionary readings of the appointed day for which he wrote them. Part of Bach’s duties as Kantor involved the provision of a cantata every Sunday at the Hauptgottesdienst (or main service), except during Lent. To understand Bach’s sacred music, particularly his cantatas, one must first reference and understand the scriptures on which his music is based. The cantatas chosen for tonight’s performance are appointed to be sung on this very weekend, the first Sunday of Advent, and their themes surround the second coming of Christ.

***Cantata 118***

Although this sublime choral piece is classified as a cantata, it is unusual among Bach’s surviving works in that it consists of a single choral movement and is technically a motet, not a cantata. Two versions exist with different scorings: one with cornett, three sackbuts, and two “litui” intended for being played outdoors; and a later one that substitutes strings and oboes. The work was composed in 1736/1737, but the occasion for which it was written is unknown. The later version with strings was arranged in 1740. The source for the text, however, is a hymn from 1610 by Martin Behm, and most likely it was composed for a funeral procession. It is also believed this motet was likely performed at Bach’s own funeral. Bach’s colorful word-painting is evident throughout, particularly on the last phrase, “the burden of sin presses down heavily upon me.” Tonight we sing only one stanza of the hymn, but the number of repeats, or verses sung, would likely correspond to the length of the procession for which the work was used.

## *Cantata 61*

Bach composed the church cantata *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, BWV 61, in Weimar for the first Sunday in Advent, the Sunday which begins the liturgical year. It was first performed on December 2, 1714. The movements are based on the Appointed Readings: Epistle: Romans 13: 11-14 and Gospel: Matthew 21: 1-9.

*Opening movement:* The first movement is significant in that it was one of the first uses by Bach of the French Overture in liturgical music. The French Overture is unusual in sacred music because it was a secular structure with implications of the court, monarchy, and upper middle class wealth. Bach's French Overture begins with the first phrase of the chorale in the continuo line; this same phrase is then taken up in turn by the sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses, all repeating the same melody, for the "Saviour of the Gentiles to approach us," a clear indication of Bach's intention to ensure and underscore that this message is heard and understood. The first section concludes with four-part harmony stating "the Savior is indeed the Child of the Virgin."

The second section of the movement, typical of the French Overture, is imitative rather than fugal writing; the voices enter with the same motive derived from the third chorale phrase:



This idea forms the basis of the whole section, stating "the whole world stands in awe." The music conveys a sense of marvelling in a number of ways, including trills in all parts, a physical representation of awe-struck wonderment. The chorale structure briefly returns encompassing the statement of the final phrase — "God has ordained Him for such a birth" — depicting the splendour of the Saviour.

*Tenor recitative & aria:* The tenor informs us that He has come, accepting us as kin despite our feebleness — "Oh God, what is there that You have not done and do not yet do for Your people?" The answer given is the "Sacred Light which He shines upon us."

The aria stands at the important central place, or Herzstück, of the cantata. It requests Jesus to come to the Church and grant us all a blessed New Year. The New Year, of course, meaning the liturgical new year which is the first Sunday of Advent. The obbligato melody is played by violins and violas in unison, a combination Bach frequently employed, sometimes for prominence and emphasis and others because of the richer, slightly darker tones.

The triple meter often has symbolic significance, and although there is no specific mention of the Trinity in this text, Bach may have had in mind the particular Trinity of Christ, pulpit, and altar, all of which are mentioned —“come, promote Your name, maintain the doctrine and bless both pulpit and altar.”

*Bass recitative:* To understand this brief movement, one must reference the appointed scripture, “behold, I stand at the door and knock.” The pizzicato effect replicates the “knocking at the door” referred to in the text. The string voicings, particularly with the addition of the two viola lines, create a four-part texture above the continuo, producing an eerie, almost supernatural effect. Even the vocal line briefly replicates the sounds and actions of “knocking”; the text states simply, “I stand and knock on the door, and whosoever shall come, we shall sup together.” Violins and violas “knock” above voice and continuo:



*Soprano aria:* The second and final aria is for soprano and continuo, and although it maintains the theme of Jesus approaching, the emphasis is more upon the individual Christian's reaction — "Open my heart and allow Him in." The ritornello theme suggests precisely the described events: knocking (3 notes), waiting (rest), and drawing near:



Is Bach also depicting the command to lay open one's heart into which Jesus makes His spiritual entrance? The contrasting middle section is an adagio setting conveying a complete acceptance of the divine Spirit — "though I be made of dust and clay, He will accept me and delight that I have become His host."

*Final chorale:* Bach sets only the last two phrases of the chorale *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*, sung by the sopranos. The question is, why did Bach truncate this final movement in this way? Conceivably the most convincing explanation lies, as it so often does, within the text — "Amen, come wondrous Crown, do not delay, I await You longingly." The hymn tune itself, through its very abbreviation, implies a sense of urgency and the feeling of being unable to defer any longer. Though highly unusual, the shortening of the chorale has precedence, harkening back to Buxtehude. Therefore, when the examples of precedence are taken along with Bach's innate sense of dramatic effect, there is ample justification for what he does. Mincham notes: "Even as we wait, we can rejoice, and the three lower voices combine in an outpouring of affectionate longing below an ecstatic violin obbligato which rises to an exultant high g, two octaves above the sopranos. Our patience may be short, our longing for the blessed event great, but our 'amens' remain strong and will surely still rise to heaven!"

### ***Cantata 140***

Tonight we perform only the fourth and final chorale movements of Bach's most famous cantata, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, based on three stanzas of Philipp Nicolai's hymn of the same name. The text references the parable of the wise and foolish virgins found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25. The choral prelude is sung by the tenors, and has an orchestral accompaniment so famous today that it often stands on its own as a derived work of orchestral music. Bach later transcribed this movement for organ (BWV 645), and it was subsequently published along with five other transcriptions Bach made of his cantata movements as the *Schübler Chorales*.

The closing chorale is a four-part setting of the third verse of the hymn, "Gloria sei dir gesungen." It's interesting to note that the high pitch of the melody is doubled by a violino piccolo an octave higher, representing the bliss of the "heavenly Jerusalem."

### ***Dixit Dominus by G. F. Handel***

*Program notes courtesy of John Bawden, MMus, University of Surrey, UK*

*Dixit Dominus* is a setting of Psalm 110 (109 in the Latin Vulgate) which Handel composed in 1707, when he was only 22. Along with other Latin psalm settings and motets composed at about the same time, it very probably formed part of a setting of the Carmelite Vespers for the feast of the Madonna del Carmine. The work is scored for five-part chorus, soloists, strings, and continuo.

It seems likely that the text was originally intended for a coronation, later becoming part of the liturgy for Sunday Vespers and the ordination of priests. It is one of the most frequently referenced psalms, and from early times has been seen as one of the primary portrayals of Christ as prophet, priest, and king not only of his own people but of all nations. Nowadays it seems uncomfortably bellicose, but in Handel's time it would have been cheerfully read as a prophecy of Christ's victory not only over his earthly enemies, but also over the devil and all his works.

The psalm is set by Handel to music of exceptional brilliance, the dramatic contrasts within and between movements vividly illustrating and reinforcing the words. The

work is unified by a plainsong *cantus firmus* — a melody in greatly extended notes, against which the remaining parts weave decorative lines — which appears in both the opening and closing movements.

After the energetic opening chorus comes a simple and elegant alto solo, followed by a beautifully lyrical movement for soprano, built on a repeated triplet figure. The drama resumes in the fourth movement, one of alternating slow and fast sections, the measured “Juravit Dominus” being notable for its daring chromatic harmony and bold dissonances. The sixth and longest movement combines verses 5 and 6 of the psalm text. The unmistakable influence of Corelli can be heard in the instrumental introduction, with the two violin parts and then the voices constantly overlapping in a series of striking suspensions.

The ensuing section, “Judicabit in nationibus,” is a busy *fugato* which appropriately disintegrates at the word “ruinas.” There follows one of the most remarkable passages in this unique work: a series of percussive chords repeated to the same syllable (a device very reminiscent of Monteverdi) graphically depicts a crushing military victory. The Gloria brings back the *cantus firmus*, this time set against even more brilliant figuration than in the opening movement, and the work closes with an extended and superbly executed fugue.

