

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 95: The Gospel According to J.S. Bach

The Gospel According to J.S. Bach: Did You Know?

A Musical Vocabulary for Budding Bach Fans

Compiled by Calvin Stopert and Jennifer Trofton

BAROQUE: The period of music history from 1600 to 1750, beginning with the birth of opera and ending with the death of Bach. This was an era characterized by flamboyance and vivid expression. It was also the golden age of Lutheran church music.

BWV: *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis* or Bach Works Catalog, the numbering system used to refer to Bach's compositions. There are over 1000 BWV items in all—a testimony to Bach's astounding output. Bach was modest about his achievements, offering the classic understatement, "I was obliged to be industrious; whoever is equally industrious will succeed equally well." In his lifetime he was known as a good church musician, not as a composer, and he was largely forgotten until Felix Mendelssohn performed the St. *Matthew Passion* in Berlin in 1829. The Bach Society, established in 1850, began collecting and publishing Bach's works—a century after his death.

PULL OUT ALL THE STOPS: Put all of one's energies into something. This literally refers to pulling out the "stops" in a pipe organ so the maximum amount of air is flowing through the pipes and the organ is playing with the loudest volume. Bach not only "pulled out all the stops" in his music, proving himself to be one of the most creative and prolific composers in history, but he was also an expert in organ design and was called upon to examine new or repaired organs all over Germany. Bach's first biographer recorded, "The first thing he did in trying out an organ was to draw out all the stops and to play with the full organ. He used to say in jest that he must first of all know whether the instrument had good lungs."

KAPPELLMEISTER: Literally "chapel master." However, in Bach's time it referred to the person in charge of the music at court. So ironically, the only time in his life when Bach was called "chapel master" was when he worked for the Prince of Anhalt-Cothen and had no church music duties.

CANTOR: Literally "singer." In Bach's time this term referred to someone who taught (not just music) in a school and selected, composed, and directed the music for liturgical and civic occasions. So Bach, during his nearly 30 years in Leipzig, was supposed to be as much a teacher as a church musician. But he got permission to hire assistants for his academic duties so that he could shift his energies to directing music in the churches—a shift that did not meet the approval of all of the authorities. One of them, when hiring Bach's successor, said, "The school needs a cantor, not a Kapellmeister."

CANTATA: A term originally used in the 17th century for vocal chamber music. Although Bach rarely used the term for any of his compositions, it has become the standard designation for his multi-movement works for choral and/or solo voices, usually based on the Gospel lesson of the Sunday or feast day for which they were written. Bach wrote more than 300 sacred cantatas, though only about 200 have survived. He also wrote a few secular cantatas for entertainment and celebratory occasions at court, the university, or wealthy households. One of his best-known pieces, "Sheep may safely graze," is from Cantata 208, which he wrote for the birthday of the Duke of Weissenfels. The "sheep" originally meant the citizens of Weissenfels who could "safely graze" under the gracious care of their duke. When we hear the piece today, we generally think of sheep under the care of the Good Shepherd. Bach, no doubt, would approve.

CHORALE: Lutheran congregational hymn. Pieces commonly known as "Bach chorales" are four-part

harmonization that Bach made of chorale melodies and incorporated into his cantatas and Passions. The melodies are usually not by Bach.

COUNTERPOINT or POLYPHONY: A kind of music in which all the parts are more or less equal in importance. No one part carries the melody and no part is merely accompaniment.

FUGUE: A particular type of counterpoint based on a melodic theme (called the subject) that is played alone at the beginning of the piece and then imitated by other voices or parts. As the piece unfolds, the subject appears periodically in various parts, sometimes overlapping. Bach was the supreme master of the fugue. Near the end of his life he was composing *The Art of Fugue*, a collection of fugues all based on the same subject. Unfortunately, Bach died before he could finish it. The final, incomplete fugue ends just after Bach added a four-note theme that spells his name: B (B-flat), A, C, H (B-natural)

ORATORIO: A large-scale musical setting of a sacred text, usually a dramatic story from the Old Testament. Handel's *Messiah* is the best-known example. Bach wrote three oratorios, for Christmas, Easter, and Ascension. The typical 18th-century oratorio was devotional concert music, but Bach's oratorios were built around texts taken directly from the Bible and were intended to be played in church on the appropriate feast day, like his Passions. Bach and Handel never met. Bach traveled to Halle with the hope of meeting Handel and invited Handel to visit him in Leipzig, but neither meeting materialized.

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A Joyful Noise

Jennifer Trafton

In my grandmother's house there was an organ. It was an electric Hammond from the 1960s, the kind that *whirrrrrrrred* when you turned it on and whispered and clicked when you pushed the plastic keys. My brothers (who have grown up to be accomplished musicians) and I (who have not) all played it as children, stretching our legs far to reach the pedals and entertaining—and I'm sure occasionally annoying—the adults.

As the CHB staff discussed pictures for this issue, we were awed again and again by the magnificent organs Bach played. Organs seem, well, *old-fashioned* today, like petticoats and straight-backed wooden church pews. But they were the computers of the Baroque era, the epitome of complex craftsmanship, scientific precision, and cutting-edge technology. And Bach was their master.

For those who have come under its spell, Bach's music is anything but old-fashioned. In our Winter 2005 issue, executive editor David Neff wrote of Bach's impact on him: "I can still remember the first time I heard the creed sung as part of Bach's magnificent Mass in B Minor. It was nearly 40 years ago at UCLA under the baton of Roger Wagner. The pain of Bach's descending line in the *Crucifixus* (He was crucified) nearly moved me to tears, and then I wept with joy at the giddy shock of the brilliantly ascending *Et Resurrexit* (And rose again). Bach knew how to make theology sing."

David himself is an organist and choir director at his church, and he's not the only CHB staff member with musical interests. Emily LaHood plays the piano and guitar. I tried (and gave up) the violin a long time ago, flirted for a while with a viola da gamba, and now give private guitar and mandolin concerts for my dog, who usually hides. Doug Johnson and Rebecca Golossanov both met their spouses through music. Doug (an erstwhile drummer and bagpiper) met his wife (a mandolinist) when both were playing in a high school band. Rebecca's father, a classical guitarist, introduced her to her future husband at a concert, and although Rebecca and her new acquaintance didn't pay much attention to the music that night, she is almost certain her father was playing Bach.

With this issue we say a fond farewell (or at least, "See you 'round the hallways") to Cindy Thomas, our editorial coordinator and social planner extraordinaire for the past two years. And we welcome to the CHB staff Becky Custer, who has provided administrative support to our sister pubs *Christianity Today* and *Books & Culture* for eight years, and who will lend royal dignity to our humble crew—she can trace her family genealogy back to Charlemagne. Oh yes, and she sings in the shower.

A round of applause for Calvin Stapert, our expert consultant who inspired us and provided us with a wealth of information about Bach.

Next issue: The Gnostics: Who they were, why the early church attacked them, and how their teaching lives on.

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To the Glory of God Alone

Fueled by his Lutheran faith, J. S. Bach devoted his life to creating music for refreshment, proclamation, and praise.

Calvin R. Stapert

In the 16th century, a baker named Veit Bach fled Hungary because of his Lutheran beliefs. He settled in the small town of Wechmar in Thuringia in central Germany. His descendants survived the Thirty Years' War and spread throughout Thuringia over the next century. They became so prevalent in musical positions in towns and churches that the name "Bach" came to be synonymous with "musician."

In a genealogy compiled in 1735, one of those descendants wrote with a mixture of loving amusement and pride about Veit: "He found his greatest pleasure in a little cittern [a wire-strung plucked instrument], which he took with him even into the mill and played upon while the grinding was going on. (How pretty it must have sounded together! Yet in this way he had a chance to have time drilled into him.) And this was, as it were, the beginning of a musical inclination in his descendants."

The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul.
—J.S. Bach

The great-great-grandson who wrote those words was none other than Johann Sebastian Bach, arguably the greatest composer in the history of Western music and a man whose staunch Lutheran faith informed his life, his career, and his view of music. He believed that music was a "refreshment of spirit," as some of the title pages of his works stated. He believed that music was a powerful tool for the proclamation of the gospel, as his cantatas, Passions, organ chorales, and other compositions clearly show. And ultimately, he believed that music brought glory to God, as the initials SDG (*Soli Deo Gloria*, "To God alone be glory") at the end of most of his scores bear witness.

Johann Sebastian Bach was born on March 21, 1685, in the small town of Eisenach in western Thuringia. He was the eighth and last child of Johann Ambrosius Bach, Eisenach's town piper. At the top of a hill overlooking the town is Wartburg Castle, where Frederick the Wise gave refuge to Martin Luther after Pope Leo X excommunicated the reformer in 1521. During his time there, Luther translated the New Testament into German. At the foot of the hill is St. George's Church. Luther preached there while traveling to and from the Diet of Worms, where he was called by Emperor Charles V to answer the charge of heresy. 164 years later, Bach was baptized there. Luther had attended the Latin School in Eisenach as a child, and Bach attended the same school nearly two centuries later. Almost literally from cradle to grave, Bach lived and worked in a part of the world where, as James R. Gaines put it, "Luther was a great deal more compelling than gravity."

Bach's childhood home was busy and crowded. In addition to seven siblings, there were two orphaned cousins, some of Ambrosius's apprentices, and other relatives from time to time. The environment was saturated with music. Bach probably studied violin with his father and perhaps got his initial organ training from his uncle Johann Christoph, who was the town and court organist. In the family genealogy, Bach described him as "the profound composer."

Bach's first biographer Johann Nicholas Forkel described the family gatherings: "[T]he first thing they did ... was to sing a chorale. From this pious commencement they proceeded to drolleries which often made a very great contrast with it. For now they sang popular songs, the contents of which were partly comic

and partly naughty, all together and extempore, but in such a manner that the several parts thus extemporized made a kind of harmony together, the words, however, in every part being different."

Bach's life in Eisenach was brief. Before he was ten years old, his parents died within a year of each other. For the next seven years, the orphaned boy lived first in Ohrdruf in the home of an older brother, Johann Christoph, and then in Luneburg at St. Michael's School, where as a choirboy he received free tuition, room, and board plus a small stipend. In Ohrdruf and Luneburg, Bach completed the general education he had begun in Eisenach. His studies in Lutheran theology laid a firm foundation for his later work as a composer of music for worship.

Ohrdruf and Luneburg also provided ample opportunity for musical growth. In Ohrdruf, Bach studied organ with his brother, the organist at St. Michael's Church. Christoph owned a manuscript of keyboard music by some of the most notable organists of the day, including his teacher Pachelbel. Bach would get up at night, slip his hand through the grate of the locked cabinet, pull out the prized manuscript, and copy the music by moonlight. But when Christoph discovered the copy, he confiscated it.

Luneburg offered Bach opportunities to absorb a wider range of musical influences, including performances by great organists and even French music from the ducal court of Celle. But as a boy chorister, the center of his musical world shifted toward choral music, not only because of the daily rehearsals and services, but also because of the excellent library of music by leading composers of both Latin and German church music dating back to the 16th century.

Moving up the scale

After finishing school in 1702, Bach was ready for the "real world." All we know about his first job in Weimar is that the treasury register reports six months' payment "To the Lackey Baach." But in 1703 he was appointed organist in Arnstadt—an indication that already in his late teens he was a highly accomplished organist in an area full of accomplished organists.

The Arnstadt position carried a relatively light workload that left him plenty of time for practicing and studying the works of famous composers. But Bach's time there was beset with problems. He got into a street brawl with a student bassoonist and overstayed his leave to hear the great organist Dietrich Buxtehude in Lubeck. He had asked for four weeks leave; he stayed almost three months!

Given the troubles in Arnstadt it is not surprising that, when the organist of St. Blasius's Church in Muhlhausen died in 1707, Bach applied for and obtained the job. He went into his new position with enthusiasm. In addition to playing and composing music, he supervised the renovation of the organ. He also upgraded the church choir and orchestra and collected a large library of choral church music. The few cantatas he composed (for example, Cantatas 4 and 106) show that he had already attained exceptional musical and theological acumen and a surpassing ability to join the two.

Despite his initial enthusiasm and a good relationship with his employers, Bach was not long satisfied with the position. One year later he wrote a letter requesting dismissal so that he could accept an appointment as Court Organist to the Duke of Weimar. The letter said that the Weimar position would offer a better opportunity for "the achievement of my goal of a well-regulated church music"—that is, a series of cantatas for all the Sundays and feast days of the church year. His duties at Weimar did not at first include composing church music on a regular basis. However after six years he was promoted to *Konzertmeister*, a position that included the responsibility of composing a new cantata every month.

But in Weimar, too, Bach experienced difficulties. This time it was court intrigues and being snubbed for a promotion that prompted him to seek work elsewhere. In 1717 he received an invitation to become *Kapellmeister* in the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, but the duke rejected his request to leave Weimar. Bach was arrested when he tried to leave secretly. After four weeks he was released with an

unfavorable discharge.

Prince Leopold was a Calvinist. There was a Lutheran church in Cöthen where Bach and his family worshiped and where he could play the organ, but he was not responsible for the worship music. So during this time he composed mainly instrumental music, including at least some of his well-known **Brandenburg Concertos**. The prince maintained a good orchestra. Bach wrote in a letter: "There I had a gracious prince as master, who knew music as well as loved it, and I had hoped to remain in his service until the end of my life."

Harmonious marriages

Bach sometimes accompanied the prince on his travels. He returned once to find that his wife Maria Barbara, whom he had married in Muhlhausen, had unexpectedly become ill, died, and was buried while he was gone. During 13 years of happy marriage, she had given birth to seven children.

A year and a half after this tragedy, Bach married Anna Magdalena Wilke, a singer at the prince's court and daughter of the court trumpeter at Weissenfels. This too was a happy marriage. Anna Magdalena bore 13 children, bringing the total of Bach's children to 20. The large number of births increased the number of deaths that the Bach family experienced. Two of Maria Barbara's seven children, twins, died within the first year, and one died at age 24. Of Anna Magdalena's 13 children, five died in the first year and three died between three and five years.

Anna Magdalena must have been a remarkable woman. In addition to caring for a busy household, she continued to sing and helped her husband by copying scores and parts. Eventually her handwriting became so much like her husband's that it is sometimes difficult to tell them apart.

Picking up the tempo

A few days after Bach's marriage to Anna Magdalena, Prince Leopold also married. Leopold's new wife was not enthusiastic about music. This, along with the memory of his first wife's death, may have made Bach think of looking elsewhere for work. When the post of cantor at Leipzig became vacant in 1722, Bach applied. He was only the third choice among several applicants. The first turned down the offer, and the second could not obtain release from his employer. One of the Leipzig town councilors infamously said, "As the best are not available, I suppose we must take one of the second-rate men."

The Leipzig position gave Bach the opportunity to return to his goal of a well-regulated church music, and he pursued it with unimaginable energy. Scholars once assumed that Bach wrote his more than 150 surviving Leipzig cantatas gradually over the 27 years he worked there until he died in 1750. But in fact, he composed a new cantata for virtually every Sunday and Feast Day during his first two years—approximately 60 per year. He did this even though his duties included teaching at St. Thomas's School as well as providing music for St. Thomas's and St. Nicolaus's Churches. And composing these 15- to 30-minute works for choir, soloists, and orchestra was only the beginning. Parts had to be copied (his family and students helped with this), and the technically demanding music needed to be rehearsed.

This work also involved discussion of the cantata texts with the pastors. An inventory of Bach's personal library strongly suggests that he came to those discussions well prepared. It included 80 volumes (52 titles), all of them theological. At the top of the list is the three-volume "Calov Bible"—Luther's translation of the Bible with parallel commentary selected from Luther's works by Abraham Calov—followed by two sets of the complete works of Luther.

Dealing with dissonance

After these first two years, Bach's cantata output slowed down and by 1727 it virtually stopped. Not

surprisingly, even Bach's enormous energy was reaching its limits. He had achieved his goal of a well-regulated church music—with at least three yearly cycles of cantatas to draw from—and troubles with unappreciative church and school authorities were mounting.

In August 1730, Bach wrote a "Short But Most Necessary Draft for a Well-Appointed Church Music" to the Leipzig town council complaining about the lack of support and the insufficient number and quality of performers available. A few months later he wrote to a friend, "The authorities are odd and little interested in music, so that I must live amid almost continual vexation, envy, and persecution."

A passage marked by Bach in his Calov Bible commentary perhaps relates to his strained relationship with his Leipzig employers. Next to Luther's commentary on Matthew 5:26, Bach wrote "NB" (note well) and underlined this passage: "As far as your person is concerned, you must not get angry with anyone regardless of the injury he may have done to you. But where your office requires it, there you must get angry, even though no injury has been done to you personally." It is not far-fetched to see here a frustrated church musician whose ideals have been thwarted by his superiors.

Tuned to a higher key

A well-regulated church music was not the whole of Bach's vocation. His larger calling was writing music to the glory of God and the edification of his neighbor. This, as the historian Jaroslav Pelikan wrote, "bespeaks the conviction of Luther and the Reformers that the performance of any God-pleasing vocation was the service of God, even if it did not lead to the performance of chorales. The Bach of the Peasant Cantata, the partitas, and the concertos was not 'too secular.' These were, rather, the expression of a unitary ... world view, in which all beauty ... was sacred because God was one, both Creator and Redeemer."

The period following his intense initial activity at Leipzig is perhaps most representative of that worldview. While continuing to direct cantatas and Passions in the Leipzig churches, he also directed the Collegium Musicum performances at Zimmermann's coffee house. And side by side with such great "secular" works as the *Goldberg Variations*, Book II of the *Well-tempered Clavier*, *Musical Offering*, and *The Art of Fugue*, we find him putting the finishing touches on his great Passions and chorale preludes, composing the Catechism Chorales of *ClavierÜbung* III, and completing the B Minor Mass.

Bach knew that the times were changing. In these later works, he was erecting monuments upholding the high view of music bequeathed to him by his ancestors: music as a "refreshment of spirit" for his neighbor, a tool for the proclamation of the gospel, and a way of giving glory to God. In the world around him, that view was rapidly giving way to a lower view of music spawned by the Enlightenment, which defined it as "the art of pleasing ... an innocent luxury ... a gratification of the sense of hearing" (Charles Burney), or an art that "merely plays with sensations" (Immanuel Kant).

Bach could not subscribe to such a view. The B Minor Mass was his last and greatest tribute to the venerable art of music and to the highest purposes for which that art could be used.

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Caffeine and Counterpoint

The coffee craze unleashed Bach's whimsy.

Elesha Coffman

According to Garrison Keillor, "Lutherans drink coffee as if it were the Third Sacrament." This was not always the case. In the first half of the 18th century, many Germans looked askance at java, considering it a pernicious import. Additionally, some European princes forbade or heavily taxed coffee, in part to protect locally produced beverages from competition. Nonetheless, Leipzig boasted many lively coffeehouses. It was, after all, a college town, and higher education requires caffeine.

In one of those coffeehouses, Zimmerman's, a group of mostly student musicians known as the Collegium Musicum met every Friday to give informal concerts. Bach directed the group, and around 1732 he wrote the perfect piece for it: the **Coffee Cantata**.

A cantata—a standard vocal form of the era—unfolded a theme through a dramatic story. Sometimes this theme was secular, and sometimes it was sacred. The **Coffee Cantata** apparently carried no sacred overtones. Albert Schweitzer, in his two-volume analysis of Bach, noted, "it aims only at refreshment." Bach adapted the lyrics from a story his chief librettist, Picander, had published in 1727. Picander generally showed more creativity with secular than sacred subjects, and this tale displays a delightfully light touch.

The cantata begins, "Be quiet, stop chattering, and pay attention to what's taking place." A surly German father, Herr Schlendrian, is quarreling with his daughter, Lieschen, about her coffee habit. Schlendrian exhorts her to give up the brew, threatening to withdraw privileges until she obeys. Lieschen pouts, "If I can't drink my bowl of coffee three times daily, then in my torment I will shrivel up like a piece of roast goat."

Finally, Poppa thinks he has found her weakness; he swears she will not have a husband unless she abandons her beverage. Lieschen assents—but only after writing into her marriage contract that she may drink as much coffee as she likes. The piece ends, "A cat won't stop from catching mice, and maidens remain faithful to their coffee. The mother holds her coffee dear, the grandmother drank it also; who can thus rebuke the daughters!" Throughout, the music is as melodramatic as the words.

Not much of Bach's surviving correspondence or composition evinces such wit, but an obituary co-written by his son asserted, "His serious temperament drew him by preference to music that was serious, elaborate, and profound; but he could also when the occasion demanded, adjust himself, especially in playing to a lighter and more humorous way of thought." Musicologist Edwin Hughes described the stiffly titled **Well-tempered Clavier** this way: "The moods are manifold, varying from rollicking good humor to the profoundest depths of religious fervor. Here one finds whimsical conceit, gentle sadness, nobility, gaiety, wistfulness, soul-searching introspection, crushing grief, astoundingly unique flights of fancy that defy cataloguing, all spread out with a kaleidoscopic prodigality of inspiration."

Bach clearly enjoyed his craft as much as Lieschen enjoyed her coffee.

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Singing the Word of God

Protestant reformer Martin Luther planted the seed that grew into a rich musical tradition culminating in Bach.

Mark Noll

Johann Sebastian Bach was a Lutheran by profession, a Lutheran by personal persuasion, and a Lutheran in his musical practice. Before he took up his post as cantor in Leipzig, he went through two theological examinations, which he passed by endorsing the Formula of Concord, a statement of faith from 1577 that encapsulated the high points of Martin Luther's theology. The inventory of Bach's books made after his death included two sets of Luther's works (one in German, one in Latin) and several volumes of his miscellaneous writings, along with a number of major works by Lutheran theologians.

Bach stood squarely in the Lutheran tradition, not just in following the substance of Luther's theology, but also in actively building upon what Luther had accomplished as a writer of hymns and a promoter of church music. What Bach harvested was a seed planted by Luther himself.

The dawn of the theological Reformation in Germany was also the dawn of Protestant church music, and the principal agent for both was Martin Luther. Luther's importance for the musical tradition that climaxed with Bach came from three things: his theology of music, his musical practice, and his own activity as a hymn writer.

Luther often expressed the conviction that music was, under God, of supreme importance. In comments he made at meal times, which eager disciples recorded as his "Table Talk," Luther several times described music as "the greatest gift of God which has often induced and inspired me to preach." In his view, God gave music to humanity as a way to impress men and women with the glory of divine gifts.

In 1542, Luther wrote a preface to a collection of funeral hymns. In it he explained what was so important about singing the truths, indeed the very words, of Scripture: "We have put this music on the living and holy Word of God in order to sing, praise, and honor it. We want the beautiful art of music to be properly used to serve her dear Creator and his Christians. He is thereby praised and honored and we are made better and stronger in faith when his holy Word is impressed on our hearts by sweet music."

A few years later, shortly before his death, Luther supplied another preface, this time to a major hymnal published in Leipzig by Valentin Bapst. It began by quoting Psalm 96: "Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord all the earth." As Luther saw it, the great occasion for song is the work of Christ in justifying guilty sinners: "For God has cheered our hearts and minds through his dear Son, whom he gave for us to redeem us from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this earnestly cannot be quiet about it."

One of the fruits of the believer's praise is evangelistic: Christians sing and speak about what God has done "so that others also may come and hear it." Even more, gospel truth set to music encourages those who have experienced the gospel: "Therefore, the printers do well if they publish a lot of good hymns and make them attractive to the people with all sorts of ornamentations, so that they may move them to joy in faith and to gladly sing." For Luther, nothing could fit better the sobering realities of God's law (the hidden gospel) and the comforting realities of the good news in Christ (the revealed gospel) than affective, heart-felt, joyful song.

Let my people sing

Luther's musical practice followed his theological principle. When he revised the Catholic mass for use in the new "reformed" churches, which he did very soon after his break from Rome, the new services were jammed full of music. Chorales, chants, brief liturgical compositions, hymns for daily use, and more—all were to be sung as the believer's response to the grace of God.

Luther pursued a path that lay between two significant Christian alternatives. Against Catholic tradition, Luther insisted that all the people of God sing, not just the priests and specially prepared choirs. Modern scholars like Christopher Brown have argued persuasively that congregational singing, perhaps more than any other single factor, secured the survival of Protestantism in Europe. Although Luther's own musical standards were relatively high, his great concern was what could be called the musical priesthood of all believers. Because God's grace in Christ was for all, all should sing. Because Christ made his people a royal priesthood before God, the voices of all priests (that is, all Christians) should be raised in song. With Luther began the broad, deep, and extraordinarily significant tradition of congregational hymnody that remains one of the great gifts of the Reformation to the worldwide church.

But against some of his fellow Protestants, Luther's musical practice was free rather than restricted, expansive rather than prescriptive. Other early Protestants like Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich and John Calvin in Geneva valued music and shared Luther's belief that a biblical reform of theology required a biblical reform of worship. But these Reformed leaders defined a biblical reform of worship as hewing as closely as possible to specific scriptural guidelines. Thus, since the Bible said nothing specific about polyphonic music (the complex singing of multiple lines of tunes and texts), the use of the organ, or the free composition of new hymns, their churches would use only biblical materials (usually paraphrased Psalms) as their church music. Some results of this practice, like the tunes and texts of Calvin's *Geneva Psalter*, made a memorable musical contribution, but it was a limited contribution.

By contrast, Luther thought it was biblical to use every form of God-honoring expression to praise the God of grace, just so long as that praise did not violate biblical truth. Lutheran church music, as a result, almost immediately created a rich culture of choir directors, choristers, organists, composers, and performers. In 1538, Luther expressed this theology in yet another preface, this time to a full collection of masses, vespers, antiphons, responsories, and hymns that was published by Georg Rhau (whose career included a stint at the Thomas Church in Leipzig where Bach would later serve). At a time when other parts of the Protestant world were narrowing musical expression, Luther boldly defended polyphony and compositional complexity as showing why "next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise."

To Luther, the reasoning behind this judgment was transparent: "when [musical] learning is added ... and artistic music which corrects, develops, and refines the natural music, then at last it is possible to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God's absolute and perfect wisdom in his wondrous work of music." Those who did not see it that way got one of Luther's characteristic brush-offs: "any who remain unaffected [by skilful polyphony] are unmusical indeed and deserve to hear ... the music of the pigs."

On the free use of music for the greater glory of God, the path from Luther to Bach was direct.

A mighty fortress

Luther, the theologian who defended music and the church reformer who called for music, was also the Christian pastor who wrote music. Luther was condemned by the pope and outlawed by the emperor in 1521. Almost immediately, he then began to work on many tasks of church reform, including hymns that he wrote himself. The authoritative American Edition of *Luther's Works* contains 37 hymns, 24 of which were written or first published in 1523 and 1524.

Almost all of the Luther's hymns are tied closely to biblical texts. They are not poetic flights of fancy but

carefully constructed vehicles for gospel teaching. His most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," is a loose, Christ-centered paraphrase of Psalm 46. Whatever the possible connections of this hymn to Luther's own spiritual journey, the editors of the American Edition are clearly correct in saying that "he did not write it to express his own feelings, but to interpret and apply the 46th Psalm to the church of his own time and its struggles." The key to Luther's interpretation is the second verse. In the translation by George MacDonald, which catches the rhythms of Luther's German better than smoother English translations, Luther affirms, "'Tis all in vain, do what we can, / our strength is soon dejected." But then comes the gospel proclamation:

But He fights for us, the right man,
By God himself elected.
Ask'st thou who is this?
Jesus Christ it is, Lord of Hosts alone ...
So he must win the battle.

Luther sometimes modified existing medieval texts for his hymns, just as his tunes often cannibalized existing music (though not, as frequently repeated, from the tavern). Often he wrote hymns to accompany the seasons of the church year—as for Christmas ("From heaven on high I come to you / I bring a story good and new"), Pentecost ("Come, Holy Spirit Lord and God, / Fill full with thine own gracious good / The faithful ones' heart, mind, desire; / In them light of thy love the fire"), or Holy Trinity Sunday ("God the Father with us be ... Jesus Savior with us be ... Holy Spirit with us be").

Two features of Luther's hymns made them an important beginning point for what Bach would later bring to culmination. One was Luther's skillful setting of texts to tunes, in his case mostly music based on ancient church styles. Bach would write with a much fuller repertoire of modern major and minor scales but, like Luther, would also skillfully use musical conventions to mirror the meaning of texts.

The second feature was Luther's consistent focus on the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. His moving paraphrase of Psalm 130 begins with the sinner's condition: "From trouble deep I cry to thee." It moves on to a realistic assessment of that need: "If thou iniquities dost mark, / Our secret sins and misdeeds dark, /

O who shall stand before thee?" The answer comes from the heart of Luther's theology:

To wash away the crimson stain,
Grace, grace alone availeth;
Our works, alas! are all in vain;
In much the best life faileth;
No man can glory in thy sight,
All must alike confess thy might,
And live alone by mercy.

Significantly, J. S. Bach set this hymn to music several times. He did the same with other Luther hymns, some more than once.

The Lutheran legacy

By Bach's 18th century, the stream of Lutheranism was dividing into contentious currents. The Pietists stressed the need for a living theology of the heart. As part of their critique of dead orthodoxy, they called for simpler church services and simpler church music. Bach vehemently rejected these proposals, but he did embrace the Pietists' emphasis on a Christ-centered religion in which the human heart was drawn by the affections to God's love manifest in Jesus.

On the other side of the theological spectrum, Bach knew Lutheran theologians who were moving in the direction of rationalism. As children of the Enlightenment, they stressed the ability of the human mind to discover the secrets of the universe. Bach shared with these theologians a commitment to regularity and order, as the stunning precision of his compositions testified so beautifully. But he also recoiled from any rationalistic tendencies that detracted from the Bible's depiction of human sinfulness and divine redemption in Christ.

Bach was his age's most powerful exponent of Martin Luther's theology and practice. Indeed, the great modern historian Jaroslav Pelikan has asserted that Bach might be considered among the premier expositors of Luther's theology for any age. For Bach, the lodestar—musically, ecclesiastically, theologically, temperamentally, professionally—was Luther's understanding of Christ and his work. As summarized in Martin Geck's recent biography, "That [God] can be found only ... through the suffering and cross of Jesus Christ and his followers, is an insight coming from Luther and one that Bach passed down in a great many different ways in the texts of his cantatas and passions but most of all in his music itself."

Theological student and writer Sarah Hinlicky Wilson recently explained why she is a Lutheran: "The only reason I follow Luther, as far as I can figure, is because Luther followed Christ. ... The Jesus I get in Scripture and sermons and hymns and sacraments is there because Luther told his evangelical followers to give Jesus away freely in them." It could just as easily have been J. S. Bach who wrote these words.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 95: The Gospel According to J.S. Bach

The Gospel Truth

Luther believed that music has the power to teach Christian doctrine. He put this belief into practice with his catechism hymns.

Mark Noll, translations by George MacDonald

Luther wrote six hymns to be sung as part of his instruction in the catechism, which was his simple but powerful explanation of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

When he preached on the Lord's Prayer, for example, the congregation also sang the hymn he wrote that paraphrased and expanded each of the prayer's petitions. Luther's explanation of the final "amen" echoed his instruction from the *Small Catechism* about what the believer should do after saying a final evening prayer ("Then go to sleep at once and in good cheer"):

Amen! that is, let this come true!
Strengthen our faith ever anew,
That we may never be in doubt
Of that we here have prayed about.
In thy name, trusting in thy word,
We blithely say Amen, O Lord.

The hymn for the Apostles' Creed features a memorable versification of the second part concerning Christ and his work:

He was made our elder brother
That the lost might find salvation;
Slain on the cross by wicked men
And raised to life again.

The hymn to accompany instruction on baptism, which was the last of these hymns that Luther composed, first tells the story of Jesus' own baptism:

To Jordan when our Lord had gone,
His Father's pleasure willing,
He took his baptism of St. John,
His work and task fulfilling.

Then it turns to the contemporary significance of the rite and offers a full summary, not only of Luther's theology, but of the theology that drove J. S. Bach as well:

The eye but water doth behold,
As from man's hand it floweth;
But inward faith the power untold
Of Jesus Christ's blood knoweth.
Faith sees therein a red flood roll,
With Christ's blood dyed and blended,

Which hurts of all kinds maketh whole,
From Adam here descended,
And by ourselves brought on us.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 95: The Gospel According to J.S. Bach

Grace Notes

Luther's example inspired Christian composers to fill the church with the finest music they could create.

Carlos Messerli

Music flourished in German Protestant churches after the passing of Martin Luther. For the next 200 years, Lutheran composers such as Johann Walter, Michael Praetorius, Heinrich Schütz, and Dietrich Buxtehude put musical flesh and blood on Luther's belief that music was a gift of God. Like Luther, they believed that church music should proclaim the gospel and praise the Creator, be skillfully composed and skillfully performed, and incorporate congregational participation. Their music featured texts from Luther's German translation of the Bible, the liturgy, and popular hymns. The lives and achievements of these four men in particular show that they were not merely "predecessors of the great J. S. Bach" but outstanding Christian musicians in their own right.

Johann Walter (1496-1570) **Luther's musical pioneer**

Martin Luther was a fine amateur musician, but he knew he needed professional help in order to carry the gospel to the people. He chose a younger friend, Johann Walter, for that purpose.

Walter's background prepared him well for the challenge. He displayed exceptional musical talent during his school years and published his first work at age 28—a choral collection of a few historic Latin hymns and 23 new German hymns (chorales) by Martin Luther and Walter himself. Luther saw something special in his younger colleague and recommended Walter for the position of musical leader of the Latin school and church in Torgau. Walter thus became the first Lutheran cantor—the forefather of hundreds upon hundreds of Lutheran church-school teachers and church musicians.

At Torgau, Walter set many texts of Luther's German translation of Scripture to music and put into practice Luther's goal of encouraging worshipers to participate more actively in the service by singing the new German chorales. The powerful hymn texts and tunes became popular. Walter and other musicians loved them and embellished them in all kinds of ways for choirs and organ.

Walter was innovative in another way. For centuries during Holy Week, Roman Catholic priests and deacons had chanted the biblical story of Christ's Passion. One person sang the words of the Gospel writer (e.g., John), one sang the words of Jesus, and a third sang the words of all of the other participants. Walter had a different idea. His Passion settings retained the solos of the Gospel writer and Jesus but gave the words of the crowd and other characters to the choir. This kind of conversation between soloists and choir influenced composers for over 200 years.

Walter, like Luther, was convinced that God had created music to carry the message of salvation. In 1538 he wrote a poem called "In Praise of the Noble Art of Music," in which he cited nearly every biblical passage that expressed how music was part of God's revelation. In fact, he declared, of all the arts music most clearly proclaims God's word: "No other arts with it compare, / For it breathes purest Gospel air, / Exalting Holy Writ on high / And earning highest praise thereby."

Michael Praetorius (1571-1621) **Champion of the people's song**

Praetorius was a pivotal figure in Lutheran church music—a man of extraordinarily broad interests who respected the old tradition of music for trained choirs yet created new settings of chorales for the people.

The son of a Lutheran schoolteacher who had been a colleague of Johann Walter, Praetorius received musical instruction at the Latin School in Torgau before briefly attending the University at Frankfurt. Apparently, Praetorius never graduated or continued his formal musical education, but he must have demonstrated outstanding ability, for in 1595 he secured a provincial court position as organist at Wolfenbüttel. He became director of the chapel music establishment in 1604. He later traveled widely and attained fame as a performer, composer, and author. By the time of his death, he had also accumulated a considerable fortune—rare for a church musician in any age. He showed his charitable nature by bequeathing funds to set up a foundation for the poor.

Praetorius believed that highly artistic music can communicate Christian faith. He set many traditional liturgical texts to music and often adopted the new Italian technique of having two, three, or even four choirs singing at one time from various places in the church. This produced an impressive stereo effect.

But Praetorius also loved the Lutheran chorale, the people's song, because it gave worshipers a chance to sing the biblical story of salvation in simple language set to singable tunes. He wrote an astounding 1,200 chorale settings for voices and instruments. One of these is "Lo, how a rose e'er blooming," still sung at Christmas today. In many of his pieces, the choir, accompanied by wind and string instruments, sang an artistic setting of the hymn for one stanza, and the congregation responded by singing the next in unison. This practice formed a kind of friendly competition between choir and congregation.

Praetorius also wrote an illustrated, multi-volume encyclopedia of music history, theory, instruments, and church music. It is still considered the most complete and reliable summary of the general musical knowledge and practice of his day.

Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) **Court musician in love with the Bible**

Schütz was born into the well-to-do family of a German innkeeper who later became village mayor. As a boy, his aptitude for music and his beautiful soprano voice earned him the attention of Count Moritz of Hesse-Kassel. Moritz invited Heinrich to attend his new school in Kassel and join his court choir. At Kassel, Heinrich proved his value as a singer and composer so convincingly that Moritz sent him to Italy to learn the modern Italian style of composition.

When Schütz returned, others coveted his services. Finally, in a tug-of-war for musical talent (similar to recruitment competition for modern collegiate athletes), Elector Johann Georg I of Saxony pried Schütz away from Kassel for his court at Dresden, the foremost German musical establishment of the time. Schütz remained in the service of the Dresden court for most of his long and productive life.

Schütz's choral works for the church and court are expressions of his sincere Christian faith and his love of the Bible. Despite his achievements and fame, he was a humble man who suffered much in difficult times. When his 24-year-old wife died, he compensated for his sorrow by composing simple, four-part, hymn-like settings of all 150 Psalms for use in Christian households and by his choirboys in church. When a dear friend and patron died, Schütz created the ***Musicalisches Exequien (German Requiem)***, one of the most profound masterpieces of Christian music. Throughout the cruel later part of the Thirty Years' War, his choir members suffered such severe hardships that he supported some of them out of his own pocket.

In happier times, he wrote magnificent settings of the Psalms of praise in the grand Italian style for multiple choirs and instruments—productions only possible because of the financial resources of the Dresden court. He also set many Gospel passages to music for use in the church liturgy. In his 80s,

Schütz wrote three masterpieces of sacred choral music, the St. Matthew, St. Luke, and St. John Passions, that are still used by churches during Holy Week. He died an internationally respected Lutheran church musician.

Dietrich Buxtehude (c. 1637-1707) **"Faithful servant" with talented fingers**

Dietrich Buxtehude, the greatest organist in the generation before J. S. Bach, was the son of a small-town Danish organist and schoolteacher. He was raised in a conservative Lutheran household with much exposure to music. At the age of 31, after serving at two other churches, he assumed the important post of organist at St. Mary's Church in Lübeck, Germany, which had a magnificent organ with 52 stops. His tenure at St. Mary's lasted nearly 40 years until his death in 1707.

Buxtehude was a virtuoso organist, skilled in improvising. Many of his pieces featured a chorale melody in either simple or highly ornamented arrangements. His very elaborate musical introductions often left the congregation in the dark about exactly which hymn was to be sung next. This confusion led to the practice of posting the hymns (by number) on a board visible to all, a practice that was still common in many churches throughout much of the 20th century.

Buxtehude was a profoundly devout Christian, but also a man of the world. He described himself as a "faithful servant of the church," a fact borne out by the care and skill with which he chose and set to music biblical texts for worship.

Although he did not direct the choir at St. Mary's, Buxtehude wrote many choral works (later called cantatas) that, along with his organ performance, were part of his famous **Abendmusiken** (Evening Music) events at the church. The celebrated concerts attracted the attention of the 21-year-old Bach, who traveled 280 miles on foot in 1705 in order to attend the **Abendmusiken** and learn from the aging composer and organist. Buxtehude's music was well known throughout much of Europe. Today, every accomplished organist must be able to perform at least some of his works.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 95: The Gospel According to J.S. Bach

What Language Shall I Borrow?

When Bach wanted to express the depths of Christ's suffering, he used the words and melodies of well-known hymns.

Jennifer Woodruff Tait

Bach was not the first to try his hand at telling the story of Christ's suffering and death in musical form; such settings of the Gospel accounts were common from the Middle Ages onward. Yet Bach's settings of the Passion story endured because of their ability to place the listener at the foot of the cross—and some of the hymns he used became famous in the process.

Bach's Passions present both the onward march of the biblical narrative toward the cross and devotional commentary on that narrative. A soloist representing the Gospel writer (e.g. Matthew or John) narrates the biblical text, while the choir sings the part of the crowd. Other solos and chorally sung hymns, usually in the first person, apply the Scripture story to the life of the individual believer. To drive this application home, Bach used hymns familiar to churchgoers of his day—including two 17th-century texts still sung today, Paul Gerhardt's "O Sacred Head Now Wounded" and Johann Heermann's "Ah, Holy Jesus."

Luther built a strong tradition of congregational hymn singing characterized, in his hands, by hymns like "A Mighty Fortress" (termed by one music historian "that triumphant war-cry of the Reformation"). But violent theological controversy in the 16th century between two strands of Protestantism (the Lutherans and the Reformed), the devastation of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), and periodic outbreaks of the plague prompted later German hymn writers to focus more deeply on the inner spiritual life of the believer. Both Heermann and Gerhardt were part of this transformation. They were also no strangers to personal suffering.

Sifted in Satan's sieve

Born in Silesia (at the time part of Germany, but now in Poland), Johann Heermann (1585-1647) was the only surviving child of five and was in poor health throughout his life. After an eye infection ended his brief teaching career, in 1611 he became deacon and then pastor of the Lutheran church in Köben near his hometown.

The Thirty Years' War was hard on Köben, which was burned, plundered, and ravaged by the plague over the next several decades. Heermann lost all his possessions more than once, and was nearly killed or forced to flee several times. In 1634 a throat problem brought an end to his preaching, and he retired from the ministry in 1638.

Heermann published three collections of hymns. His hymn "Ah, Holy Jesus" was loosely based on a Latin poem attributed to St. Augustine in his day but now thought to have been the work of medieval monk-theologian Jean de Fécamp. Composer Johann Crüger soon united the hymn with a tune inspired by the Genevan Psalter.

Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676) was born in Saxony, part of modern-day Germany. Like Heermann, he grew up in the shadow of the Thirty Years' War. While he was studying theology at the University of Wittenburg, Swedish soldiers set a fire in his hometown of Gräfenhainichen that destroyed over 400 buildings, including the Gerhardt family home.

Ordained in 1651, Gerhardt pastored several Lutheran churches in and around Berlin. Here he came into conflict with Elector Frederick Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Prussia, a follower of the Reformed faith. In 1662 the Elector issued an edict forbidding preachers to mention the theological differences between the Lutherans and the Reformed in their sermons. Gerhardt refused to abide by this rule and lost his job in 1666. By this time, all but one of his six children had died in infancy, and his wife Anna Maria died in 1668, leaving him a widower with a young son. He obtained another church position in Lübben at the age of 63 and died there seven years later, reportedly with a stanza from one of his hymns on his lips. The motto on his official portrait read, "A theologian sifted in Satan's sieve."

Gerhardt wrote or translated over 130 hymns, many of which appeared in collections published by Johann Crüger. "O Sacred Head," first published in 1656, was a translation of a medieval poem sometimes attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux. The Latin text was in seven parts, one for each day of Holy Week, each contemplating a different aspect of Christ's body on the cross. Gerhardt chose to translate the last section addressing the head of Christ. (Interestingly, Crüger set Gerhardt's text to the tune of a well-known love song beginning, "Confused are all my feelings—a tender maid's the cause.")

All for sinners' gain

Like many of the popular hymns Bach used in his Passions, Gerhardt's and Heermann's lyrics paint a vivid picture of the Crucifixion and make the experience intensely personal.

"O Sacred Head" puts the singer at the foot of the cross and describes Christ's suffering body in vivid and frequently gory detail—a quality somewhat obscured by our modern translations. Our familiar opening stanza is actually a combination of Gerhardt's first two stanzas, which reads in the original: "O Head full of blood and wounds, full of pain and full of scorn, / O head, bound in mockery with a crown of thorns, / O Head, once decorated with the highest honor and adornment, / But now insulted to the utmost—I greet you! / Noble face, before you at other times the world takes fright and shakes in fear. / How have you become so covered with spit? How have you grown so pale? / Who has so shamefully mauled your eyesight, which no other light outshines?"

After further contemplating Christ's suffering, Gerhardt asserts that it was all for our sake (the stanza we know as "What thou, my Lord, hast suffered/ Was all for sinners' gain"). He makes a passionate statement of love for Christ not usually found in modern translations: "Receive me, O my shepherd. / By you, O fountain of all good things, much good has been done to me; / Your mouth has refreshed me with milk and sweet food; / Your Spirit has bestowed much heavenly pleasure on me."

Gerhardt proclaims a willingness to stay with Christ to the end, unlike the faithless disciples: "I want to stay here with you—do not reject me. / I will not go away from you as your heart breaks. / When your head grows pale in the last stroke of death, / Then will I clasp you in my arm and bosom." The final stanza connects Christ's death with his power to save: "When I finally depart, do not leave me. / When I shall suffer death, then walk with me. / When my heart is stricken with complete anxiety, / Then pull me out of that anguish by the strength of *your* anguish and torment."

Love without measure

"Ah, Holy Jesus," though not as gory, is equally passionate. Our modern translation omits the fact that Heerman addresses Jesus not objectively as "holy" but personally as "beloved of my heart." Where Gerhardt focuses on describing the Crucifixion, Heerman emphasizes how our sinfulness led Jesus to be crucified: "O great love, O love without any measure, / Which has brought you to this road of torture! / I lived with the world in pleasure and joy, / And you must suffer."

Gerhardt wants to comfort Jesus in his anguish, but Heerman cannot think of any act he can offer and finally exclaims, "No human heart can invent anything to give you back in return. / With all my senses I

cannot perceive / Anything to compare to your compassion./ How then can I repay/ Your deeds of love?" Our modern translation's last stanza ("Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay thee") leaves us contemplating Jesus' great sacrifice, but Heerman goes a step further as he envisions himself contemplating the resurrected and glorified Christ: "When, O Lord Jesus, there before your throne, / The crown of honor sits upon my head, / Then, when all around rings out beautifully, / I will sing praise and thanks to you."

The Cross of life

Bach used "Ah, Holy Jesus" in both the ***St. John Passion*** and the ***St. Matthew Passion***. Stanzas of the hymn appear when Jesus predicts his crucifixion, when the soldiers come to arrest him in the garden, and when he proclaims before Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world. "O Sacred Head" appears only in the ***St. Matthew Passion*** (although in the ***St. John Passion*** Bach used another famous Gerhardt hymn that we know today as "Upon the Cross Extended"), but it reappears throughout the work, illustrating everything from Jesus' prophecy of his suffering, to the disciples' desertion in Gethsemane (where Bach uses the stanza professing a willingness ***not*** to desert Christ), through the scourging and mocking, to the moment when he breathes his last.

We do not know whether Bach knew the details of Gerhardt's and Heermann's lives. But he shared their faith in the face of tragedy—a faith devoted to Christ who suffered yet was triumphant, who was crucified by human sin yet forgave his betrayers. In Bach's Passions, these hymns become the suffering believer's voice, expressing both anguish and redemption. As one modern version of "O Sacred Head" puts it: "My days are few, O fail not, with thine immortal power, / To hold me that I quail not in death's most fearful hour, / That I may fight befriended, and see in my last strife / To me thine arms extended upon the cross of life."

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Johann Sebastian Bach

The Renaissance

1450

1455 Gutenberg completes first Bible using movable type

1483 Martin Luther is born

1509 John Calvin is born

1517 Luther posts his "95 Theses" on indulgences in Wittenberg

1521 Luther is excommunicated by the pope; at Diet of Worms, he refuses to recant writings; he begins translating the New Testament into German while hiding in Wartburg Castle

1523 Luther publishes Latin Mass for the church in Wittenberg

1526 Luther publishes German Mass for use in small congregations; Johann Walter becomes "the first Lutheran cantor" in Torgau

c. 1527 Luther writes hymn "A Mighty Fortress"

1529 Luther publishes *Large Catechism* and *Small Catechism*

1534 Luther publishes German Bible

1534 Break between Church of England and Roman Catholic Church

1536 Calvin publishes *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

1538 Walter writes "In Praise of the Noble Art of Music"

1539 Luther preaches at St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig

1543 Copernicus argues that earth revolves around sun

1546 Luther dies

1555 Peace of Augsburg gives Catholic and Lutheran rulers in Germany the right to choose their territories' religion

1585 Johann Heermann, writer of the hymn "Ah, Holy Jesus," is born

1595 Michael Praetorius becomes organist at Wolfenbüttel

c. **1597** The first opera *Daphne* is performed in Florence, Italy

The Baroque Period

1600

1600 Shakespeare writes *Hamlet*

1603 Queen Elizabeth I of England dies

1607 Paul Gerhardt, writer of the hymn "O Sacred Head," is born

1611 King James Bible is published

1618 Beginning of the Thirty Years' War in Europe

1636 Heinrich Schütz writes *German Requiem*

1642 English Civil War begins

1647 Westminster Confession becomes the standard of Presbyterian faith in Scotland

1648 Peace of Westphalia ends Thirty Years' War

1667 Milton publishes *Paradise Lost*

1668 Dietrich Buxtehude becomes organist at St. Mary's Church in Lübeck, Germany

1669 Rembrandt dies

1675 Philipp Spener's *Pia desideria* launches German Pietist movement, emphasizing personal devotion and simple worship

1680 Antonio Stradivari begins making violins

c. **1680** Johann Pachelbel writes Canon in D Major

1685 Johann Sebastian Bach is born in Eisenach, Germany

1685 George Frideric Handel is born in Halle

1687 Newton publishes theories on motion and gravity

1695 Bach's father dies; Bach goes to live with brother Johann Cristoph in Ohrdruf

1700

1700-1702 Bach is a choirboy in Lüneberg

- 1703** Bach becomes lackey and musician at the court of Duke Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar
- 1703-1707** Bach serves as organist of the New Church in Arnstadt
- 1705** Bach visits Buxtehude in Lübeck
- 1707-1708** Bach serves as organist at St. Blasius Church in Mühlhausen
- 1707** Bach marries his cousin Maria Barbara
- 1707** Publication of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* by English hymn writer Isaac Watts; Methodist hymn writer Charles Wesley is born
- 1708** First performance of *Gott ist mein König*, the only one of Bach's cantatas to be published in his lifetime
- 1708-17** Bach serves in the court of Dukes Wilhelm Ernst and Ernst August of Saxe-Weimar
- 1717-23** Bach serves in the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen
- 1720** Maria Barbara dies
- 1721** Bach dedicates six concertos to Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg; he marries Anna Magdalena Wilcke
- 1722** Bach completes first part of *The Well-tempered Clavier*
- 1723-1750** Bach serves as cantor of St. Thomas Church in Leipzig
- 1723** First performance of Bach's *Magnificat*
- 1724** First performance of Bach's *St. John Passion*
- 1727** First performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*
- 1730** Bach writes a "Short But Most Necessary Draft for a Well-Appointed Church Music" to the Leipzig town council
- 1731** Bach publishes first part of *Clavier-Übung (Keyboard Practice)*
- 1732** Bach composes *Coffee Cantata* for Collegium Musicum performance at Zimmerman's Coffee House
- 1734-35** First performance of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*
- 1736** Bach is appointed Royal-Polish and Electoral-Saxon Court Composer
- 1741** Publication of *Goldberg Variations*
- 1742** Handel's *Messiah* is first performed in Dublin, Ireland

1747 Bach visits the court of Frederick the Great

1748-49 Bach completes B Minor Mass

1750 Bach dies

The Classical Period

1750 (-c. 1820)

1756 Mozart is born

1759 Handel dies

1759 Voltaire publishes ***Candide***

1770 Beethoven is born

1776 American Declaration of Independence

1789 French Revolution begins

Paul Westermeyer contributed to this timeline.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 95: The Gospel According to J.S. Bach

Sermons that Sing

As part of his century's lengthy worship services, Bach's music reinforced and deepened the proclamation of the Word.

Robin A. Leaver

Johann Sebastian Bach served as Cantor of the St. Thomas Church, Leipzig, for the major part of his life. His last resting place is in the chancel of the church, marked by a bronze plaque that simply bears his name.

But when you visit the church today, local guides will usually point out two other things. One is the pillar against which the pulpit used to stand, the place where in 1539 Martin Luther preached to introduce the Reformation into the city and the surrounding area. The other is the gallery in the west end of the church, the site of the earlier gallery from which, two centuries after Luther, Bach directed the music of worship.

Earlier in this issue, Mark Noll has recounted how Luther, an extraordinary preacher, was also an accomplished musician. Now, this essay tells how Bach, the superlative musician, was also an effective preacher. But Bach did not preach from a pulpit as Luther did; his musical "sermons" came from the gallery at the back of the church. There stood the principal organ, and there the instrumentalists and singers played and sang what Bach created and directed.

Music for proclamation

Bach never called these pieces "sermons in sound," though that is what they are. He did not often call them "cantatas," the term modern musicians most commonly use to refer to them. He labeled them instead as church "motets" or "concertos," or more simply as "pieces"—**Stücken**, the term commonly heard today in connection with pieces of cake!

Most people today misunderstand these pieces. Because they are usually presented in concerts, the common view is that they are small-scale oratorios, independent works like Handel's *Messiah* or Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. And they are usually presented three or four at a time.

But Bach did not see them as independent musical works. Instead, Bach composed his cantatas for the two principal Leipzig churches, St. Thomas and St. Nicolaus. On alternate Sundays, these two churches heard Bach's cantatas as a significant part of the service of worship (usually the Eucharist). These services were long—lasting up to four hours—with a complex liturgical order based on Luther's evangelical reinterpretation of the traditional Mass.

In that service, the cantata was closely connected with both the reading of the Gospel and the sermon. The simple sequence was this:

Gospel, Nicene Creed, Cantata, Hymn, Sermon.

The portion from one of the Gospels appointed for that day was read. The choir responded to the Gospel, affirming the faith by singing the Nicene Creed in Latin. Then the choir and instrumentalists performed the cantata. The whole congregation responded by singing in German the hymn *Wir glauben all' an*

einen Gott ("We all believe in one true God"), Luther's rhyming, metrical version of the Creed. After this second affirmation of faith came the sermon, a detailed exposition and application of the day's Gospel reading. The cantata therefore stood in the middle of a sequence that began with the Gospel reading and ended with the sermon. Like the sermon, the cantata was also an exposition and application of the Gospel of the day.

The human problem and God's answer

Like other composers, Bach needed someone to script the text he would use from the Bible, familiar hymns, and original material. The writers would structure the cantatas' libretti (as such texts were called) in much the same way as the sermons of the time. Indeed, some of the authors, such as Erdmann Neumeister of Hamburg, were pastors, and their poetic cantata texts grew out of their preaching.

Many cantatas begin with a biblical text, either from the Gospel of the day, or closely related to it. In Bach's libretti, this is frequently a statement about human sinfulness and the demands of God's Law. Then follows a series of movements (sections) in which the problem is expounded. Some of these movements are brief musical statements sung in the rhythms of ordinary speech (recitatives), focusing on the specific spiritual need announced in the opening movement. This then becomes the central theme of the more elaborate song (aria) that follows, a poetic text full of biblical imagery.

Midway through these movements, often in a recitative, the cantata answers the spiritual question raised in the previous movements—often by referring to the Gospel of grace and forgiveness. The remaining movements rejoice in the implications of this aspect of the Gospel. The libretto usually ends, as did many sermons of that time, with a stanza of an appropriate hymn that underscores the Gospel answer to the Law question, or whatever was the primary theme of the libretto.

An example of this is the cantata "My Heart Swims in Blood" (BWV 199). It begins with a recitative that states the problem: "My heart is bathed in blood, / For now my sins' great brood / Within God's holy vision / A monster makes of me." But in the third movement, the Gospel promise is announced: "But God shall be gracious to me." The following movements acknowledge sin and claim Christ's sacrifice: "I lay myself into these wounds now / ... They shall be now my resting place. / Upon them will I firm in faith be soaring, / In them content and happy singing." The final movement rejoices in the reality of reconciliation: "How joyful is my heart / for God is reconciled ... "

A musical Trinity

Thus as a literary form, the cantata is closely related to preaching. But when Bach adds music to these texts, he adds further levels of meaning and application.

In some movements of his cantatas and other vocal works, Bach expresses theological concepts in his choice of the musical form. Many elements of his Mass in F (BWV 233) come in threes, evoking the Trinity. Three prayers for mercy are sung: The bass sings the "Lord Have Mercy" section of Luther's Latin Mass, while the soprano sings Luther's German version of the "Lamb of God" section of the Mass. Sandwiched in the middle is a three-voice fugue in three parts for the three-fold liturgical prayer, "Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy."

Traditionally, each part of this prayer is addressed to each Person of the Trinity in turn. The first theme of Bach's fugue is addressed to God the Father. The second part honors God the Son, so Bach inverts the first theme so that the second becomes a mirror image of the first, because the Son is the image of the Father. Then for the final part, addressed to God the Holy Spirit, Bach weaves together both the original theme and its inversion. This embodies in musical form the Nicene Creed's statement that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son." The movement is a **tour de force** of musical and theological counterpoint.

Would every member of the congregation have picked up all these associations? Probably not. But in the same way, a congregation may not recognize all of a preacher's rhetorical techniques—alliteration, repetition, reiteration, metaphor, allegory, and the like—and yet these techniques working together can produce an effective sermon.

The freedom of grace

Other examples of Bach's musical interpretation of Scripture would have been readily understood by the congregation. Cantata 106 is a funeral cantata with a libretto mostly made up of biblical quotations and one from the Apocrypha. Two in particular are juxtaposed: "It is an old decree/law that you, O man, should die" (Ecclesiasticus 14:17) and "Yes, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). The lower voice parts (alto, tenor, bass) sing of the demands of Law in strict "legalistic" counterpoint. Set against this is the soprano who sings with great freedom the words from Revelation. Here in musical terms is the fundamental nature of Luther's theology: the distinction between the Law (strict counterpoint) and the Gospel (unfettered melody).

Another example is found in Cantata 9, a cantata based on a hymn about the distinction between the Law and Gospel. The fourth movement is a bass recitative that says the Law is to be obeyed, but sinners fail to do so, and thus Christ fulfills these demands on their behalf. The next movement, a soprano and alto duet, states that good works are ineffective since one is justified only by faith. If you look at the score on paper, you can see an incredibly dense texture of overlapping canons. But the sound you hear is a lively and airy message of grace. The texture is Law, but the sound is Gospel. Here is Bach the preacher conveying theological themes in musical form that cannot be described as either "intellectual" or "dry."

All the good tunes

The melodies of the Lutheran chorales (as their hymns were called) were deeply embedded in the memories of the congregations that Bach served. He could therefore add further dimensions of meaning by using these melodies. Of course, when the people heard these melodies, their normal texts immediately came to mind, and another layer of meaning became apparent.

The movement from Cantata 106 referred to above is a good example. In the middle of the three-voice counterpoint of Law, against which is contrasted the freedom of the Gospel, the listener suddenly hears a familiar chorale melody played by violas da gamba. Bach's congregation would have thought of the hymn's words: "I have committed my things to God, / he does with me what pleases him; / should I no longer live here, / I do not contest, / to his will I submit myself completely."

Cantata 12 is also full of superlative examples of theological hermeneutics, such as the second movement, part of which became the *Crucifixus* of the B Minor Mass. The sixth movement, a tenor aria, is an exposition of the command "Be faithful," although the text never explicitly says to what or to whom we should be faithful. The ambiguity is dispelled when a trumpet begins to play a chorale melody that Bach's original listeners would have recognized immediately: "Jesus, My Joy." Thus the trumpet explains the command: We are to be faithful to Jesus.

There is a similar example in Cantata 48. In the first movement, the choir poses the question: "O wretched man that I am, who will redeem me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). Again an instrument supplies the unmistakable answer by playing a familiar chorale melody: "Lord Jesus Christ, Thou Highest Good."

The Gospel reading for the Sunday before Lent is Luke 18:31-43. It has three elements: First, Jesus tells the disciples that they are going to Jerusalem where he will suffer, die, and rise again; second, they set out for Jerusalem; third, they pass by a blind man in the crowd who cries out to Jesus for mercy.

In the orchestral introduction to Cantata 127, written for this Sunday, Bach expresses all three themes in musical form. First, he creates the sound of a procession by a steady rhythm in common time. Second, Jesus' message to the disciples is underscored in the bass part, which quotes the first line of the melody of the Passion chorale "O Sacred Head Now Wounded." Third, the melody of Luther's German version of the "Lamb of God," a liturgical prayer for mercy, is played first by the stringed instruments and later by oboes. Thus it echoes the blind man in the Gospel reading. Bach presents all this to the congregation before they hear any text sung by the choir.

In step and out of step

Composers often use the device of imitation, in which voices and/or instruments repeat the same melodic phrase at different pitches and at different times (e.g., a round, canon, or fugue). Discipleship is also imitation, following the Master. So Bach uses imitation to represent discipleship. This "following the leader" can be heard in a number of arias, notably Cantata 12 (movement 5), "I Follow After Christ," and the ***St. John Passion*** (movement 9), "I Follow Thee [Jesus] Also."

But Bach could also convey imperfect discipleship in musical form. In the ***St. John's Passion*** (movement 12b), Peter is challenged with the question: "Are you not one of his disciples?" Here the discipleship of Peter is less than perfect, and so Bach makes the imitation irregular: The voices are "out of step," being displaced first by one beat and then by two, creating a sense of uneasiness in listeners and performers alike.

Bach was not a preacher in his vocal music alone; similar attention to theological detail is found in his other works, such as those for organ. For example, his ***ClavierÜbung*** (Keyboard Practice) Part III includes two sets of chorale settings of the melodies of Luther's catechism hymns—one for each of the six main sections: Ten Commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer, Baptism, Repentance, and Lord's Supper. These chorale preludes express the theology of Luther's catechisms without words. Bach treats each melody twice, one for a small organ without pedals and one for a larger organ with pedals, thus reflecting Luther's two expositions of the catechism, the ***Large Catechism*** for preachers to use in church and the ***Small Catechism*** for use in the home.

The music Bach composed for worship was as powerful as any sermon, perhaps even more so! Like all good sermons, his church cantatas are biblically based and theologically structured. Like all good sermons, they are intellectually challenging and emotionally persuasive. Like all good sermons, they are well crafted, aesthetically mature, and supremely memorable. Like his Lutheran predecessors, Bach understood the role of music in worship as the living voice of the Gospel that touches both heart and mind.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 95: The Gospel According to J.S. Bach

Bach & the Bible

His underlining and marginal comments give us a window into his personal faith.

Robin A. Leaver

Bach's "preaching" reflected what he read. The many sermon collections and commentaries in his personal library provided him with the necessary background for composing cantatas that interpreted and proclaimed the Word.

Only one item from Bach's library survives, as far as we know: the three-volume *Deutsche Bibel* (German Bible), edited by Abraham Calov and published in 1681-1682. Calov inserted Luther's comments on various Scripture passages or, if he could not find a comment by Luther, supplied his own.

The Calov Bible commentary is a vital source for understanding Bach's approach to Scripture. Each volume contains Bach's handwritten monogram. Bach underlined many passages, in both red and black ink and, most importantly, wrote his own comments in the margins. These markings give us a glimpse into Bach's personal beliefs and how he understood his vocation. Here are a few examples:

Exodus 15 records the song of praise sung antiphonally by those who had been released from slavery in Egypt, with Moses leading the men and Miriam leading the women. Alongside verse 20 ("Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances"), Bach wrote, "NB [*nota bene*, 'note well']. First prelude for two choirs to be performed to the glory of God."

1 Chronicles 25 lists the members of the musical families of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun who are given the responsibility to lead Israel's worship, and thus "prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals." In the margin, Bach wrote: "NB. This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing church music."

1 Chronicles 28:21 reads, "Here are the divisions of the priests and the Levites for all the service of the house of God ... " Alongside Calov's commentary on the verse, Bach wrote, "NB. Splendid proof that, besides other arrangements of the service of worship, music too was instituted by the Spirit of God through David."

The heading in the *Deutsche Bibel* for the section 2 Chronicles 5:11-15 is "How the Glory of the Lord Appeared After Beautiful Music [in the Temple]." Bach underlined "Beautiful Music" and added in the margin by verse 13: "NB. Where there is devotional music, God with his grace is always present."

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Freedom and Faith

Bach still speaks to the church today.

Paul Westermeyer

Robert Shaw, a perceptive sleuth of quality and one of the 20th century's finest conductors, said that J. S. Bach might be the "single greatest creative genius" in the "whole history of the Western world." Mozart said of Bach's works, "Now there is music from which a [person] can learn something." Brahms commented, "Study Bach: there you find everything."

It isn't only experts who know that Bach stands high on the list of creative geniuses. Recordings of his music abound, books about him continue to be written, there are Bach festivals in places like Pennsylvania and Oregon, and he is popular not just in Germany but in Japan as well. His music is heard more often in the concert hall than in the church, though ironically most of it consists of cantatas written for worship. In the face of this concert-hall success, why should we 21st-century Christians listen to the music of a German Baroque composer who died in 1750? And given the church's impulse toward relevance and marketing, can we use his music at all in 2007? If so, how?

Proclaiming

One of the graduates of the Master of Sacred Music degree program I direct says she is a Christian because of Bach. She is not the only person who has told me this. Bach's reputation as the "fifth evangelist" (after Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) still reverberates today.

Bach's cantatas proclaim the good news of God's mercy in Christ. They do not seek to manipulate or sell anything. They simply announce what God has done and does. By doing so, they extol God with "boundless freedom" that is paradoxically bound to form because of the Incarnation, to quote Jaroslav Pelikan. Bach's music lives out the church's presupposition that music is for the glory of God and the edification of one's neighbor.

Part of Bach's attraction, like the gospel itself, is the grace and *shalom* of such a perspective. Much of what passes for church music today assumes with the surrounding culture that music is a tool for selling things. The boundless freedom of Bach's music proclaims the freedom Christ brings and gives the lie to all deathly notions of manipulative control by music or any other means.

With this freedom come the major themes of the Christian faith. We don't have all the cantatas Bach composed for the church's Sunday services and festivals, but we have more than enough to hear him embody these themes musically as well as or better than any other composer in history.

Listening

Music takes time. It expresses an order between humanity and time by means of tonal relationships. Fine composers craft these relationships with delicious expectancy and surprise. Bach is a master of this craft. He calls us to hear with ever-new ears God's gift of music. This gift overwhelmed Martin Luther. He wanted composers to shape and develop its raw sonic material. Bach responded to the call. His music can be heard with complete integrity and joyful satisfaction purely as music.

Luther also knew that music was next to the Word of God. That means it comes "from the sphere of miraculous audible things—like the Gospel," as Oskar Soehngen wrote. And that in turn reveals a remarkable reality: Words about the Word can be sung. Luther delighted in this relationship and in the "strange and wonderful" way that one voice can sing a melody while other voices dance around it "in a celestial roundelay." Bach understood and worked out Luther's implications. He used a rich interplay of voices and instruments to underscore and magnify the meaning of texts. His music always gives us a fresh way to listen to the new song of God in Christ.

Bach wrote a huge range of music, from simple instructional pieces to complex ones that fall in the category of musical math. His cantatas stand between these extremes for normal human beings who lived in 18th-century Leipzig or who live in the 21st century anywhere. One way to introduce yourself to this music is to listen to a recording that allows you to hear the music for a service on Epiphany as it might have been heard in St. Thomas Church in Leipzig around 1740 (Bach, *Epiphany Mass*, Paul McCreech and the Gabrieli Consort & Players, Deutsche Grammophon, 457 631-2). Read the booklet of notes that goes with the recording if you want to, or simply listen. If you don't want to begin at the beginning with the ringing of church bells, start with the *Gloria in excelsis*. It's cut six on the first disk and one of history's best musical expressions of glory to God.

Worshipping

Can Bach's cantatas be used in the church's worship today? Not all churches have the resources for them, certainly, but there are more possibilities than one may think. First, worship leaders need to choose carefully from Bach's compositions. The resources and teachers are available to help us choose and perform these pieces, and responsible music directors can search them out.

Second, a church needs good musicians and singers, but they don't have to be professionals. Amateurs can learn to sing and play Bach if they are willing to practice. There are more singers and players in churches and their surrounding communities who care about Bach than we are aware of. They can be augmented if necessary by paying some instrumentalists. Even in small churches with limited resources, people are invariably grateful for the opportunity to sing, play, and hear this music. A high school band director's story is typical. He gave his band a transcription of a Bach fugue. The players at first resisted the hard work required to learn the music. After they learned the piece, however, they were not as interested in the music they played for the rest of the year because these other pieces lacked the musical substance they had found in Bach.

One obvious challenge to using Bach's choral music in church is the language barrier. Should the choir sing the music in the original German while the audience reads a written translation? Or should the choir sing an English translation that is at best only an approximation? There is no single or simple solution, and context is critical. The important thing is that, if the music is to be a *proclamation* of the gospel as Bach intended, the congregation needs to be able to understand what is being sung.

Another consideration is the cantata's place within the worship service. Any church that relies on the Word and Communion sequence of the church's historic Sunday worship pattern, and any church that embraces choirs, would seem to find Bach's cantatas ready-made. As part of the proclamation of the Word, they should work very well. The problem, however, is that Bach wrote 15- to 30-minute cantatas for weekly services that were three to four hours long. Our modern services last about an hour.

We would benefit by allowing our worship to take whatever time it needs, but respect for our neighbor includes respecting cultural restraints on time. If a cantata is chosen for Sunday morning, the sermon has to be very brief and incisive, leaving the cantata to bear the primary weight of proclamation. Extraneous elements such as announcements have to be cut or shortened. Bach calls us to focus on what is central, the Word of God with the music that proclaims it. For most churches, using a cantata could not and should not be a regular Sunday morning occurrence, but it could happen on festive occasions. It can also happen in the evening from time to time, or in a series—preferably as worship

services rather than as concerts. Parts of cantatas, not only complete ones, can also be used at worship. In all cases, take care not to turn things into a show, and believe with Bach that the congregation's singing underlies the choir's.

Going beyond the familiar

Music from the past can seem archaic. Christian worship is not a museum. It uses archaic and esoteric words from the Bible and from the church's history, to be sure, but with the promise that God will break them open so that we will hear them as the Word of God for us today. Worship leaders often use contemporary musical styles in the belief that the gospel can be more easily communicated to worshipers through music that is familiar.

But the gospel is not only about the familiar. It also brings a message that is profoundly unfamiliar, countercultural, and different from anything we can imagine. No style of music, historic or contemporary, can completely encompass this countercultural reality. Music from the past, however, helps to protect us from ourselves, keeps us from being overly insular, and gives us insights our period cannot supply. A healthy church employs the music of its own time as well as music from the past. J. S. Bach composed some of the best music of all time, much of it for the worship of the church. Why avoid such a treasure?

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The Gospel According to Bach: Recommended Resources

Dig deeper into this issue's theme.

Just getting started

- Andrew Wilson-Dickson, [*The Story of Christian Music*](#) (Fortress Press; originally pub. by Lion, 1992)
- Patrick Kavanaugh, [*Spiritual Lives of the Great Composers*](#) (Zondervan, 1996)

Martin Luther and the Lutheran tradition

- Luther's hymns and prefaces to hymnbooks can be found in [*Luther's Works, vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns*](#), ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (American Edition, Fortress, 1965).
- Robin Leaver, [*Luther's Liturgical Music*](#) (Eerdmans, 2007)
- Carl Schalk, [*Music in Early Lutheranism*](#) (Concordia, 2001)
- Kerala J. Snyder, [*Dietrich Buxtehude, Organist in Luebeck*](#) (Schirmer Books, 1987)

J. S. Bach

The definitive biography is Christoph Wolff's [*Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*](#) (Norton, 2000). The best shorter "life and works" book is Malcolm Boyd's [*Bach*](#) (Master Musicians Series, Oxford, 3rd ed., 2006). The [*New Bach Reader*](#), edited by Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel and revised by Christoph Wolff (Norton, 1998) is a superb collection of letters and other documents. Another unique and captivating biography is James R. Gaines's [*Evening in the Palace of Reason*](#) (Fourth Estate, 2005), which interweaves the lives of Bach and Frederick the Great leading up to their meeting in 1747—a clash between the Age of Faith and the Age of Reason.

The starting point for understanding the theology of Bach's music is Jaroslav Pelikan's [*Bach Among the Theologians*](#) (Wipf and Stock, 2003), as well as his book [*From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology*](#) (Concordia, 1950). Calvin R. Stapert's [*My Only Comfort: Death, Deliverance, and Discipleship in the Music of Bach*](#) (Eerdmans, 2000) is a listener's guide organized according to theological themes. Another listener's guide, though less explicitly theological, is Melvin Ungar's [*J. S. Bach's Major Works for Voices and Instruments*](#) (Scarecrow, 2005).

Here are some other helpful books on Bach's life and music:

- [*Oxford Composer Companions: J. S. Bach*](#), edited by Malcolm Boyd (Oxford, 1999)
- [*The Cambridge Companion to Bach*](#), edited by John Butt (Cambridge, 1997)
- Robin A. Leaver, [*Music as Preaching: Bach, Passions and Music in Worship*](#) (Latimer House, 1982; Concordia, 1984) and [*J. S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary*](#) (Concordia, 1985)
- Hans Conrad Fischer, [*Johann Sebastian Bach: His Life in Pictures and Documents*](#), with CD (Augsburg Fortress, 2005)

- Martin Geck, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work*, trans. John Hargraves (Harcourt, Inc., 2006)
- Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach*, trans. Ernest Newman (Bruce Humphries Publishers, 1911)

Recordings

There is no better way to learn about Bach than to listen to his music, and you will have no trouble finding good recordings of just about everything Bach wrote. The best are by the Bach Collegium Japan under the direction of Masaaki Suzuki. So far they have recorded the *St. John Passion*, the *St. Matthew Passion*, and the *Christmas Oratorio* and are about halfway through the complete sacred cantatas. Take special note of Cantata 147 (which includes "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring") in Vol. 12 and Cantata 80 (based on Luther's "A Mighty Fortress") in Vol. 27. The cantata recordings of John Eliot Gardiner, Tom Koopman, Philippe Herreweghe, and Helmuth Rilling are also very good. Here are some other noteworthy recordings:

- The *Hänssler* edition of Bach's complete works on 172 CDs, released in 2000 for the 250th anniversary of Bach's death, is excellent for "reference listening."
- *Epiphany Mass* by Paul McCreech and the Gabrieli Consort & Players
- *B Minor Mass* by Robert Shaw
- *Goldberg Variations: The Glenn Gould Edition* (1955 version)
- *St. John Passion in English* translation by Benjamin Britten

Internet resources

- J. S. Bach Home Page (www.jsbach.org)
- Bach Cantatas Website (www.bach-cantatas.com)
- American Bach Society (www.americanbachsociety.org)

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 95: The Gospel According to J.S. Bach

Bach in Japan

With the help of conductor Masaaki Suzuki, Bach's music is bringing the message of Christian hope to a secular nation.

Uwe Simon-Netto

Yuko Maruyama, a Japanese organist working in Minneapolis, was once a devout Buddhist. Now she is a Christian thanks to the music of J. S. Bach. "Bach introduced me to God, Jesus and Christianity," she told *Metro Lutheran*, a Twin Cities monthly. "When I play a fugue, I can feel Bach talking to God." Masashi Masuda, a Jesuit priest, came to faith in almost the same way: "Listening to Bach's *Goldberg Variations* first aroused my interest in Christianity." Today Masuda teaches theology at Tokyo's Sophia University.

But why would the most abstract works of an 18th-century German composer guide Asian people to Christ? Charles Ford, a mathematics professor in St. Louis, suggests that this is because Bach's music reflects the perfect beauty of created order to which the Japanese mind is receptive. "Bach has had the same effect on me, a Western scientist," explained Ford. Henry Gerike, organist and choirmaster at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, agrees: "The fugue is the best way God has given us to enjoy his creation. ... But of course Bach's most significant message to us is the Gospel." Gerike echoes Swedish archbishop Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931), who famously called Bach's cantatas "the fifth Gospel."

Rev. Robert Bergt, musical director of Concordia's *Bach at the Sem* concert series, has first-hand experience with the missionary lure of Bach's cantatas in Tokyo. He used to be the chief conductor of Musashino Music Academy's three orchestras. Bach's compositions brought his musicians, audiences, and students into contact with the Word of God, he said. "Some of these people would then in private declare themselves as 'closet Christians,'" Bergt related in an interview. "This happened to me at least 15 times. And one of them I eventually baptized myself." While only one percent of Japan's population of 128 million is officially Christian, Bergt estimated that the real figure could be three times as high if one includes secret believers.

After two failed attempts to popularize Bach's music in Japan since the late 19th century, a veritable Bach boom has been sweeping that country for the last 16 years. Its driving force is organist Masaaki Suzuki, founder and conductor of the Bach Collegium Japan that has spawned hundreds of similar societies throughout the country.

During Holy Week, Suzuki's performances of the *St. Matthew Passion* are always sold out, although tickets cost more than \$600. After each concert, members of the audience crowd Suzuki on the podium asking him about the Christian concept of hope and about death, a topic normally taboo in polite Japanese society. "I am spreading Bach's message, which is a biblical one," Suzuki told me.

But why do Bach's melodies and harmonies, so alien to the Asian ear, appeal to the Japanese? Musicologists attribute this to Francis Xavier and other Jesuit missionaries, who introduced Gregorian chant into Japan and built organs from bamboo pipes 400 years ago. Though Christianity was soon squashed, elements of its music infiltrated traditional folk song.

Four centuries later, this curious fact is now enabling tens of thousands of Japanese to come to Christ via Bach. The surprising success of this music in evangelizing one of the most secular nations on earth has led Lutheran theologian Yoshikazu Tokuzen to call Bach a "vehicle of the Holy Spirit."

Uwe Siemon-Netto, a veteran foreign correspondent from Germany and Lutheran lay theologian, is scholar-in-residence at Concordia Seminary.

You can learn more about Masaaki Suzuki and the Bach Collegium Japan by visiting their website, <http://www.bach.co.jp/>.

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