Oregon Bach Festival Discovery Series BWV 172 *Erschallet, ihr Lieder, erklinget, ihr Saiten!* 1999

Cantata 172, *Erschallet, ihr Lieder, erklinget, ihr Saiten!*, is one of the nearly 200 church cantatas composed by J.S. Bach. It is a cantata that he wrote at the beginning of his career, in 1714, when he was 29 years old. This cantata was composed for the Feast of Pentecost, so the theme of the cantata is the Holy Spirit. As you know, a church service in Bach's time started with liturgy, hymns sung by the congregation, and then at the central point of the service, just before the sermon, the cantata was performed.

The cantata begins with a brilliant opening by Bach's typical festival orchestra: strings, continuo, trumpets and timpani.





But not only is the orchestration typical for a feast day, it is also related to the text. The chorus begins with the word *Erschallet* [resound] and immediately after this imperative the trumpets start playing. Then the chorus says *erklinget*, *ihr Saiten!* [play, you strings!], and the strings will play. There is a direct and obvious connection between the words and music.



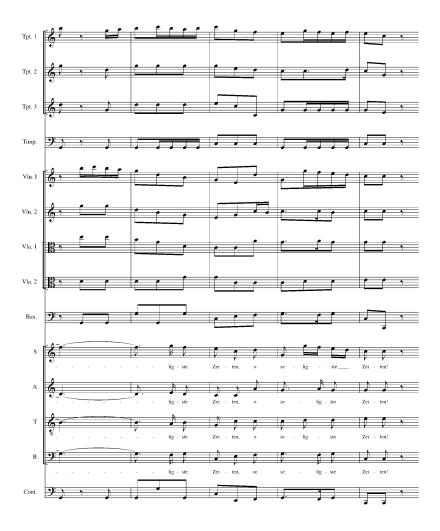
The music continues with the chorus in fast coloratura while the trumpets and timpani exchange chords with the strings, before joining together at the cadence.





Later there is a different text *O seligste Zeiten!* [O most blessed times], referring to the appearance of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The chorus has a long held chord, holding fast to the most *blessed times*, as the trumpets and strings resume their dialogue.





It is clear that this is wonderful and celebratory music, but Bach will explore further the meaning of Pentecost. In the middle section of this opening movement at the text *Gott will sich die Seelen zu Tempeln bereiten* [God will prepare the soul as temples] Bach invents a new motive.



It is short theme that will be taken up by all the sections of the chorus and orchestra. This will continue for some time, always with the same text. At the end of this section comes a special moment: the sopranos will sing the motive one last time, and after that the chorus has an extended section sung only on a vowel. I think that Bach is describing God's Spirit that blows through the souls and needs no words to be understood.





And after this middle section Bach will repeat the opening and we hear that beautiful music again.

The opening chorus is followed by a series of solo movements for the four soloists. The first is for the bass, and it is in the form of a recitative, a form that highlights the text, not the melody. The text *Wer mich liebet, der wird mein Wort halten* [He who loves me will

keep my commandments] are the words of Christ. All of you who have attended the Bach Festival for many years know that Bach always composes words of Christ for the bass voice. We also hear how Bach interprets the text. The continuo holds a long note—*keep my commandments*.



Then the text continues *und mein Vater wird ihn lieben, und wir werden zu ihm kommen* [and my Father will love him and we will come to him]. Obviously this is a cause for joy, and so we hear Bach's joy motive, a special rhythmic figure that Bach will use throughout his works to depict joy.



Here is that rhythm manifested in the cellos.



This motive is only the background to the bass, who also sings the joy motive. At the end of this short piece there appears a canon, with the bass taking the lead and the continuo following. This form is another example of Bach's musical language that will be used consistently throughout his compositions. His use of the canon will always describe how man should follow Christ. At the end of the recitative there is something unusual. Bach rarely writes the voice in unison with the continuo instruments, but here he does it to show that if one follows Christ, he will at the end be united with Him.



The recitative is followed by a bass aria. The text is *Heiligste Dreieinigkeit*, *Großer Gott der Ehren*, [Most holy Trinity, great God of honor]. This is the opening melodic line.



The keyword is the Holy Trinity: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christian theology believes that the Three Persons of the Trinity are One Being. Once again we find Bach creating a language that depicts and describes a point of faith: the three trumpets, while separate instruments, play the exact same pitches.



This is a simple symbolism for a difficult theological belief. But the setting goes on with the trumpets and continuo enfolding in a most virtuosic way. The first trumpet has an especially brilliant part.



And of course during the aria the orchestra is combined with the voice. We see Bach's joy motive once again.

The text says *Komm doch in die Herzenshütten* [come then into the shelter of our hearts], certainly a cause for joy.



After the brilliant bass aria that was dominated by trumpets and timpani, there is a great contrast in the following tenor aria. Now Bach will use just the upper strings in unison, with the counterpart in the bass continuo instruments. They have a slow walking rhythm while the strings have a floating melodic line that never ceases.



When the tenor enters with the text *O Seelenparadies* [O paradise of souls] Bach continues with the music established at the beginning, but with the added voice in the middle. Above him are the upper strings, below him are the bass instruments: he is encircled by the Spirit.



And this will continue throughout the aria. Only at one moment there is a change at the text *auf*, *auf*, *bereite dich*, *Der Tröster nahet sich* [up, up, prepare yourself, the comforter draws near].



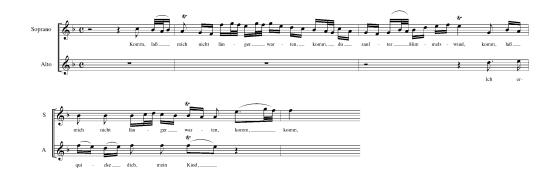
The next aria is a duet for the soprano and alto. The soprano represents the soul *Komm*, *laß mich nicht länger warten*, *Komm*, *du sanfter Himmelswind* [Come, let me wait no longer, come, you gentle breeze of heaven].



The Spirit, represented by the alto, answers *Ich erquicke dich, mein Kind* [I refresh you, my child].



The two speak in dialogue with each other.



But this is not yet all: the organ plays an unusual melody.



It is hard to recognize the chorale tune because the trills and flourishes conceal it. The melody is Martin Luther's chorale *Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott* [Come, Holy Spirit, Lord God].

The congregations in German Lutheran churches still sing this chorale on Pentecost Sunday. In this duet it is just a background, and difficult to recognize at that. But it adds the affirmation of the faith of the entire congregation to the personal and intimate dialogue of the two soloists.





And now we come to the last movement of the cantata. The text is *Von Gott kömmt mir ein Freudenschein* [A joyful light comes to me from God]. It is a typical four part setting in the chorus, with the melody in the sopranos, and most of the instruments doubling the voices.



But the first violins have an independent part that lies higher than the sopranos of the chorus. One has to ask why Bach adds an *obbligato* to the chorale. There is one word in the text that explains his intention, *Freudenschein* [joyful light]. Here is the independent melody.

The chorale is straight-forward with a steady rhythm, but the violin *obbligato* has many syncopations and counter rhythms. This joy from heaven is something that is alive; it does not conform to things on earth, but makes life richer, more beautiful. Here is the *obbligato* with the chorale.



The second half of the chorale text says Nimm mich in dein Arme, $da\beta$ ich warme werd von Gnaden [Take me in your arms, so that I may become warm with your grace]. Bach gives to the basses of the chorus a wonderful melody that starts in low range, goes high, and returns to the opening low range; a gesture of being grasped and blanketed in grace.



This is the final movement in the score, but Bach instructs the bright opening chorus to be repeated, something that he rarely does in his cantatas.