

# Unraveling the Mystery of BWV 23: Bach's Test Cantata for the St. Thomas Cantorate

*Kristina Caswell MacMullen*

“**T**hat Bach decided, in spite of the pressure of time, to enlarge Cantata 23, so to speak at the last minute, by a fourth movement is remarkable; he must have had good reasons for doing so. The details for his decision remain unknown.”<sup>1</sup> In his chapter detailing Bach's audition for the St. Thomas Cantorate in Leipzig, Christoph Wolff offers insight on the performance history of BWV 23 *Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn*, one of two test cantatas presented. Based on the extant materials, scholars have pieced together a history of the cantata's performance. Of paramount interest, the extant parts suggest that Bach added a pre-existing movement from his Weimar period, “Christe, du Lamm Gottes,” to a newly composed three-movement form at the last minute.<sup>2</sup>

Why would Bach do this? Christoph Wolff suggests Bach intended to impress with the addition of Passion music, demonstrating his capacity in a larger scale form.

<sup>1</sup> Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 128–140. In his chapter entitled “Bach's Audition for the St. Thomas Cantorate: The Cantata ‘Du Wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn,’” Wolff gives a detailed account of Bach scholarship surrounding this cantata.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Bach brought one completed work (BWV 23) with him from Cöthen; the other one (BWV 22) he apparently wrote only in Leipzig. The solo style of BWV 23 clearly follows the model of the Cöthen congratulatory cantatas. However, shortly before auditioning for the cantorate, Bach decided in Leipzig to lengthen this cantata by adding a new final movement, “Christe, du Lamm Gottes.” He did not have to write this as a new piece; rather, he took it from a Passion composition dating from his time in Weimar that he probably kept in his baggage—perhaps in order to be able to offer an example of a large concerted work, should the occasion arise. Leipzig, at least, was given a sample in 1723 in a performance on Quinquagesima Sunday.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Christoph Wolff, “Bach's Pre-Leipzig Cantatas: Repertory and Context,” in *The World of Bach Cantatas*, ed. Christoph Wolff et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995), 19.

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The  
**CHORAL  
SCHOLAR**

*The Online Journal of the National Collegiate Choral Organization*

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*Volume 6, Number 1*

*Spring 2017*

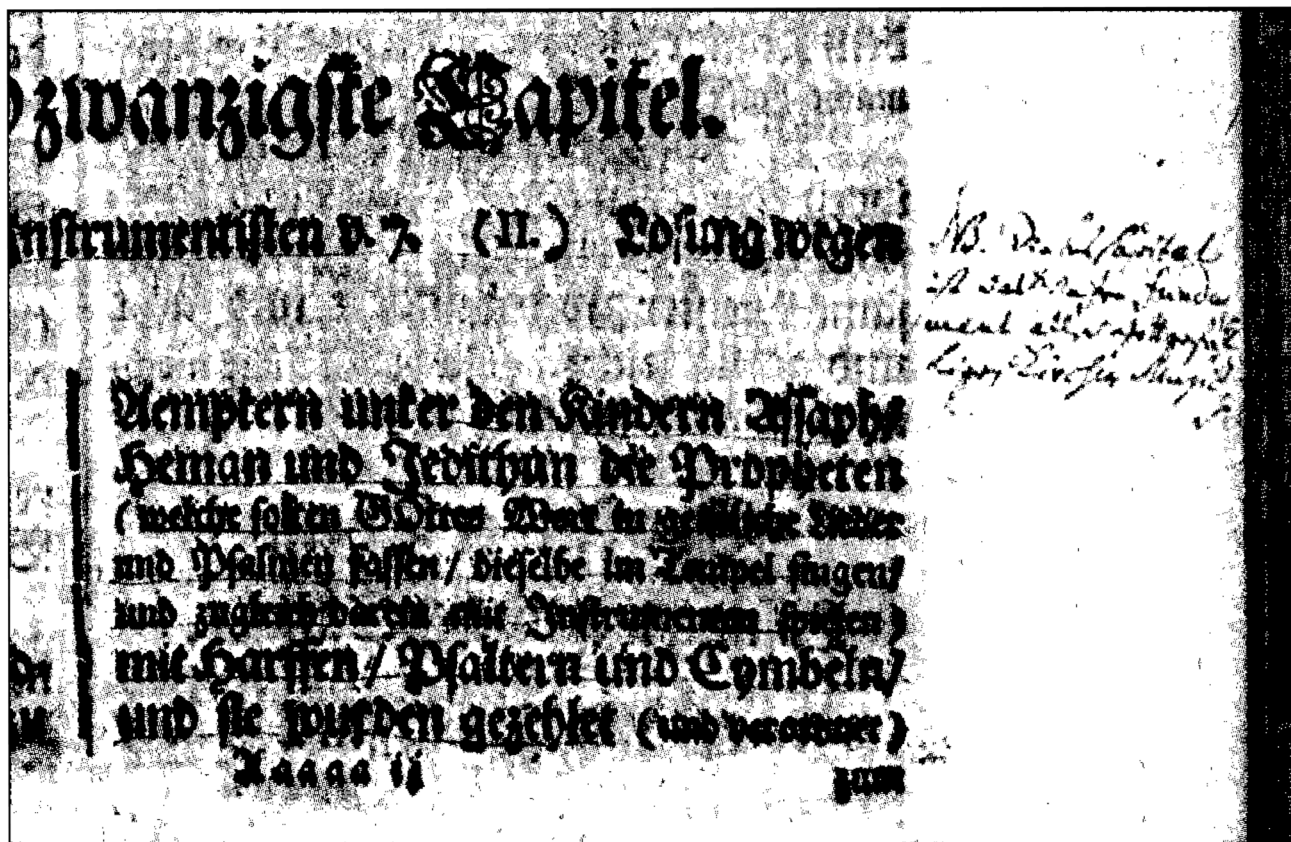
It is also possible that he decided the cantata was too short. Perhaps he had more time to fill. This seems an improbable conclusion considering the magnitude of the event. Regardless of motivation, both theories recognize the spectacular nature of this presumed addition. Even within the context of the “golden age” of Bach scholarship,<sup>4</sup> Bach’s design remains a mystery.

<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Marshall, “Toward a Twenty-First-Century Bach Biography,” *The Musical Quarterly* 84, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 497.

Was this predetermined or truly added in haste? For good reason, Bach scholarship has subscribed to the theory that this movement acted as an augmentation, albeit curious. This curiosity demands further inquiry. Is it possible, instead, that Bach began with this movement as the cantata’s foundation? Is it possible that he originally conceived of Cantata 23 as a four-movement form?

*The Calov Bible*

Figure 1. The Calov Bible, 1 Chronicles 25



40a

The Calov bible holds an important clue in the mystery of this cantata's genesis. In the early twentieth century, Christian G. Riedel discovered the personal bible, or Calov bible, of Johann Sebastian Bach. In its pages, Bach's personal commentary can be found. One of four critical notations, Bach added various underlines and a significant comment on 1 Chronicles 25:

*NB. Dieses Capital ist das wahre Fundament aller gotfälliger Kirchen Music.*

*NB. This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing church music.*

Initially, this comment seems general. A thorough reading reveals another puzzle piece. I Chronicles 25:6–8 provides a description of David's musicians,

*All these men were under the supervision of their fathers for the music of the temple of the Lord...Along with their relatives—all of them trained and skilled in music for the Lord—**they numbered 288** [emphasis added]. Young and old alike, teacher as well as student, **cast lots for their duties** [emphasis added].*

With the addition of the fourth movement, *Christe, du Lamm Gottes*, Cantata 23 contains 288 measures. The numerical significance of 288 suggests that Bach designed Cantata BWV 23 with this scripture in mind. Perhaps Bach added this comment following his appointment in Leipzig, confirming his personal ambition to create a “God-pleasing church music.”

In the commentary of the facsimile, the notes state, “In addition to the marginal comment *there is also the underlining of the summary of the chapter*: ‘(I.) Of the Singers and Instrumentalists. (II.) Appointment of the singers by lot.’”<sup>5</sup> Bach's underlining substantiates his awareness of the phrase “casting their lots.” Seven years later, Bach seems to confirm this scripture as inspiration. In a letter to Georg Erdmann of Leipzig, dated 28 October 1730, Bach writes,

At first, indeed, it did not seem at all proper for me to change my position of Cappellmeister for that of cantor. Wherefore, then, I postponed my decision for a quarter of a year, but this post was described to me in such favorable terms that finally (*particularly since my sons seemed inclined toward [university] studies*) **I cast my lot**, [emphasis added] in the name of the Lord...”

Bach's personal commentary and markings affirm that he intimately pondered this scripture.

Bach's interest in numerical symbolism is not contained to this work. Many scholars have dedicated significant study to this topic. In *Bach and the Baroque*, Anthony Newman describes symbolism in Bach's work,

There has been much interest in Bach's fascinating use of numbers and number symbolism...It is interesting that Bach used numbers in his compositions at all, and this can hardly be disputed, and very often these and other measures in different pieces

<sup>5</sup> Robin A. Leaver, *J.S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary*. (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1985), 93–94.

demonstrate that he was conscious of some kind of number symbolism.<sup>6</sup>

He continues,

The third type of Bach symbolism involves the use of numbers, generally called ‘numerology’ or ‘gematria.’ From the time of Pythagoras, the knowledge of the properties of numbers had been regarded by philosophers as a secret mystery. It was believed, even by scientists like Copernicus and Kepler, that God had arranged all things in number and measure.<sup>7</sup>

In his chapter on symbolism, Newman cites numerous instances, including but not limited to: the general significance of a number (for example, the number three as associated with the trinity), number-word symbolism using both the Roman and the Greek alphabet (A=1, B=2, etc.), the Bach signature (B $\flat$ , A, C, B $\sharp$ ), and references to the number of disciples in the *St. Matthew Passion*.<sup>8</sup> Newman closes by emphasizing the personal nature of this symbolism,

When Bach weaves his name into the fabric of the music, or when he uses numbers to relate the meaning of the word and the music, then it seems that we are part of a profound artistic and intellectual experience when we perform these works. It seems incredible that Bach would count large numbers of notes as some scholars theorize; but it does seem reasonable that he planned music in an architectural way, counting measures to determine the form of the piece, and making certain measures very meaningful.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Newman, *Bach and the Baroque: a performing guide to baroque music with special emphasis on the music of J.S. Bach*. (New York, NY: Pendragon Press, 1985), 182.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-196.

Perhaps the relationship of Bach’s biblical markings and the structural design of Cantata 23 aren’t a coincidental alignment.

### *Extant Performance Materials*

The Deutsche Staatbibliothek, Berlin holds the entire set of performance materials for BWV 23.<sup>9</sup> Bach’s original scores, excluding duplicate parts and continuo, are included in this collection. The evidence presented by these materials suggests an eventful history of performance, constituting the primary source evidence for the cantata due to possible use in performance by Bach himself. For years, general opinion held that the premiere of Cantata 23 took place on Estomihi Sunday in 1724.<sup>10</sup> With his critical research, Alfred Dürr reversed this misconception. Dürr compared the script of Bach’s copyist with that of Graupner’s. Both share the same characteristic script. His analysis firmly established that BWV 23 was indeed performed for the 1723 audition,<sup>11</sup> elevating the status of BWV 23 as particularly significant. Accordingly, it is possible that Cantata 23 was performed at least three times between 1723 and Bach’s death, in 1723, 1724, and 1728. Let us now consider the extant scores and the chronicle that they provide.

<sup>9</sup> Wolff writes, “Bach manuscripts originally belonging to the former Preußische Staatbibliothek Berlin are now divided between DSB and SPK (formerly East and West Berlin, respectively) and carry the designation Mus. Ms. Bach P and Mus. Ms. Bach St. For practical reasons and following established custom in the scholarly Bach literature, these Berlin call numbers are now and then reduced to P (P{artitur} = score) and St (St{immen} = parts).” On pp. 132–133, Wolff categorizes the parts according to watermark and scribe. He also compares the original sources for Graupner’s audition pieces, “Lobet den Herrn” and “Aus der Tief”. The Hessische Landerbibliothek, Darmstadt holds Graupner’s extant materials. Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*. xiii-xiv.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

**Table 1.** Keys for Performances of BWV 23<sup>12</sup><sup>12</sup> Ibid., 140.

| Performance Key | Parts                  | Notated Pitch       | Concert Pitch        |         |
|-----------------|------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------|
| B minor         | Vocal parts            | C minor             | B minor <sup>a</sup> |         |
|                 | Strings                | C minor             | B minor <sup>b</sup> |         |
|                 | Oboe d'amore 1, 2      | D minor             | B minor              |         |
|                 | Bassoon/harpsichord    | B minor             | B minor              |         |
|                 | Continuo (organ)       | A minor             | B minor              |         |
|                 | Cornetto, trombone 1–3 | A minor             | B minor              |         |
|                 | <i>Not usable:</i>     |                     |                      |         |
|                 | Oboe 1, 2              | C minor             | C minor              |         |
| C minor         | Vocal parts            | C minor             | C minor              |         |
|                 | Strings                | C minor             | C minor              |         |
|                 | Oboe 1, 2              | C minor             | C minor              |         |
|                 | Continuo (organ)       | B $\flat$ minor     | C minor              |         |
|                 | <i>Not usable:</i>     |                     |                      |         |
|                 |                        | Oboe d'amore 1, 2   | D minor              | B minor |
|                 |                        | Bassoon/harpsichord | B minor              | B minor |
|                 | Continuo (organ)       | A minor             | B minor              |         |
|                 | Cornetto, trombone 1–3 | A minor             | B minor              |         |

- a. Concert pitch achieved by singers' transposing at sight  
 b. Concert pitch achieved by instrumentalists' tuning down.

As is the case with many Bach scores, we are left with a divergent set of parts. As delineated by Christoph Wolff<sup>13</sup> (Table 1), there exists an initial version in C minor (movements 1–3 only), a B-minor version quickly adjusted for the premiere in Leipzig (with an added fourth movement), and the final C-minor version performed in 1728.<sup>14</sup> The evidence suggests that

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>14</sup> For both versions, the vocal and string parts are written at the same pitch level (C minor). Musicians were expected to transpose at sight or to tune down one half step. The

Bach made an alteration of key to the cantata upon his arrival in Leipzig. The adjustment seems a curious one. Bach conceived of this cantata in C minor. The performance materials reveal a B-minor premiere for his audition. Why did

B-minor version included parts for the oboe d'amore, while the C-minor version includes parts for the oboe. Only one set of parts exists for the harpsichord and bassoon (combined), cornetto, and trombone (B minor and A minor, respectively, purposed for the B-minor performance). There are two copies of the continuo part, one in A minor and the other in B $\flat$  minor. These would both sound one whole step higher, as the organ was tuned to *Chor-Ton*.

Bach adjust the key immediately following the composition's conception?

Wolff suggests the inclusion of brass as Bach's motivation for transposition. Wolff explains, "The transposition to B minor can hardly have been necessitated by any other reason than the Chorton brass participation."<sup>15</sup> Bach could have decided to support the ensemble with *colla parte* brass. Ideally, this addition would secure and strengthen the sound. Because of great variations, the addition of these instruments introduced complications of pitch, necessitating a new key for the premiere.<sup>16</sup> In the liner notes of his eighth volume of recorded cantatas, conductor Masaaki Suzuki offers an explanation:

The method used by Bach in this situation was first to set the strings down a semitone, making the opening of the chorale in B minor, so that the chorale sounds in F sharp minor. In this case, the cornet and

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>16</sup> In the liner notes of his eighth volume of recorded cantatas, conductor Masaaki Suzuki states, "Because the cornet and trombone, like the organ, play in Chorton, while the strings and oboe are pitched one tone lower, one expects to see the music for the former group of instruments written a tone lower. Since the final chorale (Mvt. 4) is in G minor, this means the cornet and trombones must have played in F minor, but this is truly a disadvantageous key for these instruments... The method used by Bach in this situation was first to set the strings down a semitone, making the opening of the chorale in B minor, so that the chorale sounds in F sharp minor. In this case, the cornet and trombones could play in E minor, which is comparatively straightforward. But since the oboe, both in terms of pitch and of the key itself, cannot play in B minor (or F sharp minor), an oboe d'amore would have to be substituted. The oboe d'amore is pitched a minor third lower than a regular oboe. Thus, B minor would become D minor, and the F sharp minor should appear as A minor. These keys, too, are comparatively straightforward. An organ part a tone low would also be necessary; in this way, the B minor manuscript for BWV 23 was performed on the occasion of the examination of the position of Kantor. This proven by the above-mentioned cornet, trombone, and oboe d'amore parts, as well as the part for the organ written in A minor by Johann Kuhnau." Masaaki Suzuki, *Liner notes of Bach Cantata Series*, Vol. 8, 1998.

trombones<sup>17</sup> could play in E minor, which is comparatively straightforward. But since the oboe, both in terms of pitch and of the key itself, cannot play in B minor (or F sharp minor), an oboe d'amore would have to be substituted. The oboe d'amore is pitched a minor third lower than a regular oboe. Thus, B minor would become D minor, and the F sharp minor should appear as A minor. These keys, too, are comparatively straightforward. An organ part a tone low would also be necessary; in this way, the B minor manuscript for BWV 23 was performed on the occasion of the examination of the position of Kantor. This proven by the above-mentioned cornet, trombone, and oboe d'amore parts, as well as the part for the organ written in A minor by Johann Kuhnau.<sup>18</sup>

The quick shift to B minor speaks to Bach's practicality. It does not appear to be a decision motivated by affect. Rather, it seems that in the audition setting, many things would have been beyond Bach's control.

In the years that followed, Bach would have freedom to prioritize aesthetics, design, and management of resources. This freedom reveals his original vision for the cantata. Bach's return to C minor for the third performance<sup>19</sup> in 1728

<sup>17</sup> In an earlier paragraph, Suzuki states, "Because the cornet and trombone, like the organ, play in Chorton, while the strings and oboe are pitched one tone lower, one expects to see the music for the former group of instruments written a tone lower. Since the final chorale (Mvt. 4) is in G minor, this means the cornet and trombones must have played in F minor, but this is truly a disadvantageous key for these instruments."

<sup>18</sup> Masaaki Suzuki, *Liner notes of Bach Cantata Series*, Vol. 8, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> The structure and history of Cantata BWV 23 shares an interesting lineage with BWV 245, the *Saint John Passion*. Foremost, the two works share the figural chorale "Christe, du Lamm Gottes." Also, much like Bach's decision to return to his initial version of the *Saint John Passion*, Bach returned to his initial conception for the final performance of this cantata.

firmly establishes C minor as the intended key. Other evidence seems to confirm this theory. According to the minutes of the Leipzig Executive Council dating January 15, 1723, Bach was granted an audition with only three weeks to prepare. Therefore, Bach was alerted of an official audition no earlier than 16 January 1723. If this was the case, it seems highly unusual that he would conceive Cantata 23 in C minor and swiftly alter the key. Instead, he could have considered the variables of an audition setting. Is it possible that Bach conceived of Cantata 23 in the months prior to January?

Only forty miles separated Leipzig and Cöthen. Leipzig news would reach Cöthen in a reasonable amount of time, and certainly, a musician of Bach's curiosity and intellect would remain aware of musical happenings in the surrounding communities. In August of 1722, Georg Telemann traveled through Cöthen on his way to Leipzig. He may have stopped to visit with his friend Bach and the young Carl Phillip Emmanuel, Telemann's godchild. Telemann did not decline the offer until November. Aware of Telemann's audition and negotiations for the post in Leipzig, Bach officially declared his earnest pursuit of the position in Leipzig, between November and December of 1722. In describing the decision to apply, Bach states,

Though at first, indeed, it did not seem at all proper to me to change my position of Capellmeister for that of Cantor. Wherefore, then, *I postponed my decision for a quarter of a year*; [italics added] but this post was described to me in such favorable terms... *I cast my lot* [italics added], in the name of the Lord, and made the journey to Leipzig, took my examination, and then made the change of position.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, *The Bach Reader: A Life*

Bach deliberated for three months prior to submitting his name. His first thoughts of application, then, occurred sometime in September or October. Certainly, the test cantata would be foremost in his mind. His work, however, hinged upon the libretto. It seems improbable that he would have received this prior to the official invitation to audition. So, if Bach had no libretto, could he begin?

Bach could have assumed that he would be presenting his cantata during or just before the Lenten season. The ecclesiastical doctrine would indicate worship purposed for somber introspection and a focus upon Christ's sacrifice. The jubilation of high brass and the kettledrum would have been inappropriate.<sup>21</sup> Bach's acuity of affect-informed worship would be at its highest, as he sought favor with the council and the community. Two characteristics of "*Christe, du Lamm Gottes*" could have compelled Bach to include this movement: the theological significance of the German *Agnus Dei* and its demonstration of his capacity in larger forms. Even though the physical putting together of the four-movement form appears to have occurred following his arrival in Leipzig, this needn't bear stalwart witness to his architectural intentions. Rather, Bach could have conceived of his four-movement design, composed the first three movements, and then assembled the whole. Considering the necessary key change, it would not make sense for Bach to create a new copy in c minor to accompany the first three movements. This would not be a prudent use of his time in these circumstances. His original copy produced in Weimar would serve just as well for the purpose of transposition.

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*of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, 125. This passage is excerpted from a *Letter to Georg Erdmann, Imperial Russian Resident agent in Danzig*. At this time, relations between Bach and the Leipzig council were strained. Bach was seeking a new position.

<sup>21</sup> Wolff, *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music*, 135.

With respect to the source materials, one detail remains to be addressed. The word *fine* is written in Bach's score at the end of movement three. This suggests that, in Bach's original scheme, movement three completed Cantata 23. A simple adjustment of perspective could account for this fact. Consider the scene. The pre-existing movement "*Christe, du Lamm Gottes*" acting as impetus, rather than afterthought, would leave only three additional movements to create. The written word *fine* at the end of movement three indicates not the end of the work, but rather the end of *Bach's* work, an end symbolizing much in his eyes. For him, a great sense of accomplishment and significance may have accompanied his final pen stroke, knowing the gravity of this potential move and its implications for the focus of his future work.

## *The Libretto*

Prior to his arrival, the Executive Council provided Bach with the libretto for his *Probestück* (audition piece). As a theologian, Bach would have been acutely aware of the theological currents and implications of the text supplied to him. Bear in mind that the original libretto submitted to Bach did not include the final chorale of Cantata 23, *Du Wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn*.

As would be the pattern for Bach's first year in Leipzig, the texts' author conceived of them as a unified whole, to be presented before and after the sermon. The anonymous poet, assumed to be Gottfried Lange<sup>22</sup> based them upon the gospel of the day (Luke 18).

<sup>22</sup> A member of the Executive Council charged with hiring the next Kantor of the Thomkirsche, Lange was a staunch supporter of Bach.

**Table 2.** The gospel of the day is listed below.<sup>23</sup>

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Quinquagesima Sunday

*Gospel: Luke 18.31–43*

Jesus and the twelve disciples go to Jerusalem and the healing of a blind man.

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### **BWV 22**

31 Then he took [unto him] the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished. 32 For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: 33 And they shall scourge [him], and put him to death: and the third day he shall rise again. 34 And they understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken.

### **BWV 23**

35 And it came to pass, that as he was come nigh unto Jericho, a certain blind man sat by the way side begging: 36 And hearing the multitude pass by, he asked what it meant. 37 And they told him, that Jesus of Nazareth passeth by. 38 And he cried, saying, "Jesus, [thou] Son of David, have mercy on me." 39 And they which went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace: but he cried so much the more, "[Thou] Son of David, have mercy on me." 40 And Jesus stood, and commanded him to be brought

<sup>23</sup> King James Translation.



unto him: and when he was come near, he asked him, 41 Saying, "What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee?" And he said, "Lord, that I may receive my sight." 42 And Jesus said unto him, "Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee." 43 And immediately he received his sight, and followed him, glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw [it], gave praise unto God.

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Cantata No. 22 *Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwölfe und sprach*

\*The *italics* indicate a chorale text. **Bold face** indicates a scriptural text.

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1

**Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwölfe und sprach:  
Sehet, wir gehn hinauf gen Jerusalem,  
und es wird alles vollendet werden,  
das geschrieben ist von des Menschen Sohn.  
Sie aber vernahmen der keines  
und wußten nicht, was das gesaget war.**

**Jesus took the twelve to himself and spoke:  
See, we are going up to Jerusalem  
and all will be accomplished.  
That has been written about the Son of Man.  
But they understood none of this  
and did not know what had been said**

2

Mein Jesu, ziehe mich nach dir,  
Ich bin bereit, ich will von hier  
Und nach Jerusalem zu deinen Leiden gehn.

Wohl mir, wenn ich die Wichtigkeit  
Von dieser Leid- und Sterbenszeit  
Zu meinem Troste kann durchgehends wohl  
verstehn!

My Jesus, draw me after you,  
I am ready, I want to go from here  
and up to Jerusalem to your suffering.

Happy am I, if the importance  
of this time of suffering and death  
I can thoroughly understand for my  
consolation.

3

Mein Jesu, ziehe mich, so werd ich laufen,  
Denn Fleisch und Blut verstehet ganz und gar,  
Nebst deinen Jüngern nicht, was das gesaget war.  
Es sehnt sich nach der Welt  
und nach dem größten Haufen;  
Sie wollen beiderseits,  
wenn du verkläret bist,  
Zwar eine feste Burg auf Tabors Berge bauen;  
Hingegen Golgotha, so voller Leiden ist,  
In deiner Niedrigkeit  
mit keinem Auge schauen.  
Ach! kreuzige bei mir in der verderbten Brust  
Zuvörderst diese Welt und die verbotne Lust,  
So werd ich, was du sagst,  
vollkommen wohl verstehen  
Und nach Jerusalem mit tausend Freuden gehen.

My Jesus, draw me, so that I shall hurry after you,  
for flesh and blood completely fails to understand  
just like your disciples—what was said.  
Flesh and blood long for the world  
and the greatest crowds;  
they want on both sides,  
when you have been transfigured,  
to build indeed a strong fortress on Mount Tabor;  
in contrast, Golgotha, that is full of suffering  
in your humiliation,  
they do not want to behold at all.  
Ah! crucify for me in my corrupt breast  
first of all this world and the forbidden pleasures,  
and then I shall perfectly  
understand what you say  
and go to Jerusalem with a thousand joys

4

Mein alles in allem, mein ewiges Gut,  
Verbeßre das Herze, verändre den Mut;  
Schlag alles darnieder,  
Was dieser Entsagung des Fleisches zuwider!  
Doch wenn ich nun geistlich ertötet da bin,  
So ziehe mich nach dir in Friede dahin!

My all in all, my everlasting good,  
beat down everything  
which is against this denial of the flesh!  
but when I am spiritually dead,  
then draw me after you in peace  
make better my heart, change my disposition

5

*Ertöt uns durch dein Güte,  
Erweck uns durch dein Gnad;  
Den alten Menschen kränke,  
Daß der neu' leben mag  
Wohl hie auf dieser Erden,  
Den Sinn und all Begehren  
Und G'danken hab'n zu dir.*

*Kill us through your kindness  
awaken us through your grace;  
make sick the old man,  
so that the new man may live  
well here on this earth,  
so that the mind and all desires  
and thoughts may be directed to you.*

Cantata No. 23 *Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn*

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1

Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn,  
Der du von Ewigkeit in der Entfernung schon  
Mein Herzeleid und meine Leibespein  
Umständlich angesehen, erbarm dich mein!  
Und lass durch deine Wunderhand,  
Die so viel Böses abgewandt,  
that has turned aside so much evil,

Mir gleichfalls Hilf und Trost geschehen.  
You true God and son of David,  
who already from eternity and from afar  
my heartache and bodily pain  
have seen intimately, have mercy on me!  
And let your miraculous hand,  
act for me likewise as help and consolation.

2

Ach! gehe nicht vorüber;  
Du, aller Menschen Heil,  
Bist ja erschienen,  
Die Kranken und nicht die Gesunden zu bedienen.  
Drum nehm ich ebenfalls an deiner  
Allmacht teil;  
Ich sehe dich auf diesen Wegen,  
Worauf man Mich hat wollen legen,  
Auch in der Blindheit an.  
Ich fasse mich Und lasse dich  
Nicht ohne deinen Segen.

Ah! do not pass by,  
you, the salvation of all mankind,  
have indeed appeared  
to serve the sick and not the healthy.  
Therefore I too take my share in your  
omnipotence;  
I see you on this road  
where they wanted to let me lie,  
blind as I was.  
I recollect myself and do not let you go  
without your blessing.

3

Aller Augen warten, Herr,  
Du allmächtger Gott, auf dich,  
Und die meinen sonderlich.  
Gib denselben Kraft und Licht,  
Laß sie nicht  
Immerdar in Finsternissen!  
Künftig soll dein Wink allein  
Der geliebte Mittelpunkt  
Aller ihrer Werke sein,  
Bis du sie einst durch den Tod  
Wiederum gedenkst zu schließen.

4

*Christe, du Lamm Gottes,  
Der du trägst die Sünd der Welt,  
Erbarm dich unser!*  
*Christe, du Lamm Gottes,  
Der du trägst die Sünd der Welt,  
Gib uns dein' Frieden. Amen.*

All eyes wait, Lord,  
Almighty God, upon you,  
and my eyes especially.  
Give them strength and light,  
do not leave them  
forever in darkness!  
In future a sign from you alone shall be  
the beloved focus  
of all their work  
until once and for all in death  
you decide to close them again.

*Christ, you lamb of God,  
you who take away the sins of the world,  
have mercy on us!*  
*Christ, you lamb of God,  
you who take away the sins of the world  
grant us your peace. Amen*

The resulting libretto divides the scripture into two distinct narratives with Pietistic tones. In large, Cantata BWV 22 deals with the sinner's plight: yearning for deliverance from the shackles of sin and sanctification. The first movement of Cantata BWV 22 consists of scriptural prose,<sup>24</sup> while the subsequent movements reinterpret

<sup>24</sup> Alfred Dürr. *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 246. Dürr describes the theology of Cantata BWV 22 "Two verses from the Gospel, Luke 18:31 and 34, preface the text like a heading: they are concerned with the announcement of the Passion and the incomprehension of the disciples (no. 1). The following movements reinterpret this text in order to make it relevant to the present-day Christian, whom Jesus is also willing to take with Him on His bitter path to the cross, so that he might grasp the event and find comfort in it (no. 2). For the Christian is in the same plight as Jesus's disciples, who are unable to comprehend His Passion and would rather participate in His Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, a reference to Matthew 17.1–9 (no. 3). The libretto ends with the prayer that heart and spirit might be made capable of the 'renunciation of the flesh', so that Jesus might draw the Christian to Him after his death (no. 4). The concluding chorale—the fifth verse of the hymn *Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn* by Elisabeth Creutziger (1524)—allows the whole congregation, as it were, to unite in this prayer."

the scripture, purposed to personalize the verses for the listener.<sup>25</sup> The libretto of Cantata BWV 23 focuses upon the cry of the blind for healing. Blindness is a metaphor for the sin of all mankind. The first movement begins with the blind man's outcry, "You are true God and David's Son." In this freely composed verse, the poet takes a more passive stance. In the second movement, the voice of the blind man gains courage and becomes assertive. In the third movement, the theme of blindness continues.<sup>26</sup> The parable and its poetic rendering inspired his creative realization of the words. He reflected on

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Still linked to the parable at hand, the librettist alludes to other scriptures. Dürr highlights these references, "The words 'You...have indeed appeared to serve the sick and not the healthy' (no. 2) recall Mark 2.17; the closing words of the same movement, 'I...do not let You go without Your Blessing' refer to Genesis 32.26; and the opening of the following chorus, (no. 3), refers to Psalm 145.15 in its assertion that not only the eyes of the blind but those of all, and therefore mine too, wait upon the Lord." Ibid.

its meaning, and intended his setting to animate the implications, particularly as the church approached the Lenten season.

At its core, Pietism focused upon the human striving for sanctification in daily life, yet the Lutheran Orthodoxy held Christ's sacrifice as paramount. Compare the following words of Luther, "Be a sinner and sin strongly, but more strongly have faith and rejoice in Christ," with the Pietistic poetry of the fourth movement of Cantata 22, "Make better my heart, change my disposition; beat down everything which is against this denial of the flesh!" In the first three movements, the Pietistic prose does not mention the death of Christ or the cross. An interesting paradox can be seen. While Pietistic tones color the poetry, the Orthodoxy of the high church, popular in Leipzig, demanded an elaborate interpretation of the libretto and a commitment to the liturgy. Appeasing both factions, Bach incorporated aspects of the Orthodoxy and the Pietism. The inclusion of the final movement "Christe du Lamm Gottes" addresses the omission of the cross.

He saturates the cantata with the chorale tune, placing it prominently in movements two and three.<sup>27</sup> When considered in the context of Bach's

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther placed the German Agnus Dei ("Christe du Lamm Gottes") in the Deutsche Messe. It was published as the setting for the Agnus Dei in Bugenhagen's 1528 manual. Ulrich S. Leupold, editor of Martin Luther's hymns and liturgies (vol. 53 of Luther's *Works*, 1965), suggests that Luther may be the tune's arranger. It seems to derive from a Kyrie melody (Gregorian Tone 1) that Luther used in his German Mass of 1526.

Leipzig and its worship ward, the final presence of the Agnus Dei chorale seems foundational to the theology of the cantata. The first movement establishes man's separation from God (blindness); the second movement reflects the sinner's individual recognition of need (soloist); the third extends this idea in a communal sense (chorus); and the final movement reflects the pain, sacrifice, and ultimate triumph of the cross.

### *Axis of the Subdominant*

A thorough examination of Cantata 23 yields a symmetrical constellation that seems to confirm a four-movement conception. Bach derives his mode of design from the *Agnus Dei* melody (Example 1).<sup>28</sup> The span of the initial pitch of the chorale to the apex is the interval of a fourth, indicating a priority of the subdominant.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Hochreither. *Performance Practice of the Instrumental-Vocal Works of Johann Sebastian Bach*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 176. Of the 192 extant cantatas (excluding the cantatas of the Christmas Oratorio), 177 have a chorale. Of the 15 without a chorale, ten were composed in Leipzig. Of those ten, five were likely based on instrumental models from the Cöthen period, two were occasional (wedding and funeral), and one was based on a text from the ordinary. The two remaining cantatas are solo works. Elaborations include: cantional settings (four-part chordal textures with the melody in the soprano voice), motet-like arrangements, cantus firmus treatments in obbligato instruments or vocal parts, arias with added cantus firmi, chorales with short instrumental interludes, retrograde inversions of chorales, motivically derived material (of the chorale tune) in the orchestra, ritornello themes based on the first lines of chorales, and opening head motives used in the instrumental parts.

#### Example 1. Opening Phrase of "Christe, du Lamm Gottes"



Accordingly, he designed a carefully constructed matrix—an axial-symmetry of the subdominant—based upon the first line of the chorale tune.<sup>29</sup> It functions as both the

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 176.

structural axis and the heart of the doctrine.<sup>30</sup> Below, a schematic (Table 3) highlights its prominent appearance, assuming the original key of C minor.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 177.

**Table 3.** Axial Symmetry of Cantata BWV 23

|                              |          |           |                      |           |          |          |          |
|------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>Movement (mv)</i>         | <b>I</b> | <b>II</b> | <b>III</b>           | <b>IV</b> |          |          |          |
| <i>Measures per mv</i>       | 62       | 15        | 153                  | 58        |          |          |          |
| <i>Axis of Subdominant</i>   | <b>c</b> | <b>f</b>  | <b>E<sup>b</sup></b> | <b>f</b>  | <b>g</b> | <b>F</b> | <b>C</b> |
| <i>Measure within the mv</i> |          | 40        |                      | 77        |          | 35       |          |

A pattern within Table 3 is worth observing. If notated on a staff, these prominent key areas indicate a chiastic figure: F-E<sup>b</sup>-F-G-F.

**Example 2.** Chiastic Figure



Each movement assumes its respective role in executing the model. In the first movement, we can see the structural reflection of the fourth movement within the larger scope of the cantata. The head of the aria in movement one appears in a curious subdominant orientation (m. 40), reflecting the extended cadence in F major (m. 35) of movement four. Both are of approximately equal length, and prioritize the subdominant at approximately the same ratio of measures; In the case of the first movement, at m. 40 of 62 total measures, and in the fourth movement, at m. 35 of 58 total measures.<sup>31</sup> In m. 77 (of 153) of the third movement, Bach writes his central ritornello in F minor. In the fourth movement, Bach finishes the cantata

<sup>31</sup> When divided, these ratios produce a similar quotient: 40/62 = .64 and 35/58 = .60.

with a final plagal gesture, moving from the subdominant to the tonic.

Numerous proofs of Bach’s love for architectonic design exist. In his book, *Performance Practice of the Instrumental-Vocal Works of Johann Sebastian Bach*, Karl Hochreither states, “Bach’s tendency toward symmetrical large-scale structures shows itself early in his career, as in Cantata BWV 106 “Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit,” for example where he incorporates a chorale at the center (the work is designed axial-symmetrically).” In discussing the St. John Passion, Eric Chafe offers, “The key areas of the Passion follow a principle—the *ambitus* of closely related keys—that holds for the vast majority of Bach’s compositional oeuvre.” Chafe gives an account of Bach’s revisions and substitutions. In his

1725 version, Bach ensured that, despite the variance of keys of the substitute movements with regard to their counterparts, that, "...in all instances, without exception, they adhered to this principle."

Locally, Bach creates several planes of musical exegesis through use of the chorale tune. In the fourth movement, he deploys the melody

with limited alteration, set with various canonic treatments and doublings in the orchestra. In the second movement, the unaffected chorale tune appears as a striking cantus firmus in the oboes and first violins, serving as an accompaniment to the tenor recitative. In the third movement, Bach moves to a new plane of expression. The first line of the chorale appears as the foundation of the ritornello (Example 3).

**Example 3.** Ritornello, Movement Three, mm. 12-20, Bass Voice



Unlike the final three movements, the first movement does not offer a quote or paraphrase of the chorale tune. Let us now examine the

substantiating evidence within each movement as realized within the specifics of Bach's design.

### *Movement One*

**Figure 2.** Movement One Overview

| <i>Type</i> | <i>Form</i> | <i>Key</i> | <i>Meter</i> | <i>Tempo</i> | <i>Forces</i>                             |
|-------------|-------------|------------|--------------|--------------|---|
| Double Duet | Da Capo     | C minor    | C            | Molt' adagio | SA soli<br>Oboe 1 and 2<br>Basso Continuo |

### *Text and Translation*

1 *Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn,  
Der du von Ewigkeit in der Entfernung schon  
Mein Herzeleid und meine Leibespein  
Umständlich angesehen, erbarm dich mein!*

You true God and son of David,  
who already from eternity and from afar  
my heartache and bodily pain  
have seen intimately, have mercy on me!

2 *Und lass durch deine Wunderhand,  
Die so viel Böses abgewandt,  
Mir gleichfalls Hilf und Trost geschehen.*

And let your miraculous hand,  
that has turned aside so much evil,  
act for me likewise as help and consolation.

Cantata 23 begins with a double duet of voices and instruments, scored for soprano and alto soloists, oboes, bassoon, organ, and continuo. The poetic text can be divided into two parts. The first reflects central tenets of the Lutheran faith. It establishes the dual nature of Christ, “You are true God and true man.” The author transitions attention from Christ to the human plight, completing part one with a cry for help. In part two, the poet once again describes the power of Christ and completes the prose with the humble hope for healing. The sentiment of the poetry inspired Bach to weave a theme of

mercy throughout the cantata. “*Erbarm dich...*” appears in the final line of part one. These words reappear in the third line of the chorale tune of movement four. To maintain focus on this plea, Bach designs a scheme that begins and ends with this idea.

The initial motive (here called the “David” motive) bears both tonal and structural significance. The first oboe introduces this mournful figure, echoed swiftly by the second oboe, and finally by the basso continuo.

**Example 4.** David motive, Movement One, mm. 1-3, Oboe I



Bach saturates the movement. This motive appears in 59 of the 62 measures, with a total of 107 iterations. It acts as a barometer throughout, as chromatic embellishments depict the uncertainty of blindness, directly drawn from the scripture of the day. The motive mutates. Even while the tonality becomes murky, each variant retains communicative power and a recognizable structure. He heightens the sense of sorrow by including frequent suspensions, weeping melodic half-steps, and harmonic distress.

The underlying poignancy of Christ’s suffering found here reappears in the oboe figure of the final movement.

### *Structure*

The David motive previews the coming tonal landscape, outlining each major area of the aria (G-F-A<sup>b</sup>-C), as each pitch functions as an element of the harmonic structure. While the opening aria aligns most closely with the simple ternary aria form, Bach avoids strict simple ternary by omitting the tutti/ritornello following B and preceding A'.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> In her dissertation, Patricia Metzler identifies this aria as a combination of *Kirchenarie* Types 2 and 3, “In *Kirchenarie* of Type 3, the recapitulation involves the return of the first vocal period in a modified form. When the first vocal period is introduced in the beginning, it does not end on the tonic and, thus, has to be modified in the recapitulation to allow the aria to cadence in the tonic. The recapitulated text always involves one or several verses which can stand on their own,” 46–49.

**Figure 3.** Major Formal Divisions of Movement One

|                 | 1                 | 11                  | 24.3*             | 32.3           | 40.3                | 54                  | 62 |
|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------|----|
| Measures        | 10<br>(3.5+4.5+2) | 13.5<br>(3.5+4+3+3) | 8<br>(3.5+4.5)    | 8<br>(4+4)     | 13.5<br>(3.5+4+3+3) | 8 (+1)<br>(3.5+5.5) |    |
| Tonality        | c                 | C                   | g                 | A <sup>b</sup> | f                   | c                   |    |
| Function        | i                 | I                   | v                 | ↓ 5ths         | iv                  | i                   |    |
| <i>Thematic</i> | <i>Ritornello</i> | <i>A</i>            | <i>Ritornello</i> | <i>B</i>       | <i>A'</i>           | <i>Ritornello</i>   |    |
| <i>Text</i>     |                   | 1                   |                   | 2              | 1                   |                     |    |

\* Measure numbers and beats are notated as follows: the first number indicates the measure, the second number indicates the beat within the measure. For example, 23.4 refers to the fourth beat of the 23<sup>rd</sup> measure.

Measures 1–24 are in C minor. From m. 24 to m. 32, Bach transitions to G minor. In the following four bars, a harmonic sequence arrives at A<sup>b</sup> major in m. 36. The fleeting A<sup>b</sup> pivots to F minor,

heralding a subdominant return. This return parallels the appearance of the subdominant in the final third of the fourth movement.

### *Movement Two*

**Figure 4.** Movement Two Overview

| <i>Type</i> | <i>Form</i> | <i>Key</i>                      | <i>Meter</i> | <i>Tempo</i> | <i>Forces</i>   |
|-------------|-------------|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------|---|
| Recitative  | Accompanied | A <sup>b</sup> – E <sup>b</sup> | C            | a tempo      | Tenor solo<br>Oboe 1 and 2<br>Violin 1 and 2<br>Viola<br>Basso Continuo |

### *Text and Translation*

|  |  |
|--|--|
| 1 <i>Ach! gehe nicht vorüber;<br/>Du, aller Menschen Heil,</i>   | 1 Ah! do not pass by,<br>you, the salvation of all mankind,                  |
| 2 <i>Bist ja erschienen, die Kranken und nicht die<br/>Gesunden zu bedienen.</i>                         | 2 You have indeed appeared to serve the sick and<br>not the healthy.         |
| 3 <i>Drum nehm ich ebenfalls an deiner<br/>Allmacht teil;</i>  | 3 Therefore I too take my share in your<br>omnipotence;                      |
| 4 <i>Ich sehe dich auf diesen Wegen, Worauf man<br/>mich hat wollen legen, auch in der Blindheit an.</i> | 4 I see you on this road where they wanted to let<br>me lie, blind as I was. |
| 5 <i>Ich fasse mich und lasse dich Nicht ohne deinen<br/>Segen.</i>                                      | 5 I recollect myself, and do not let you go without<br>your blessing.        |



Bach realizes this text as an accompanied recitative scored for tenor and full orchestra. A striking feature and a first for Bach,<sup>33</sup> the oboes and violins are combined to play the hymn tune “*Christe du Lamm Gottes*.”<sup>34</sup> An eighteenth-century listener would immediately recognize

this ancient melody. Clearly, Bach aims to bring prominence to the chorale tune. He marries the recitative and the augmented chorale tune, depicting the interaction of sinner and savior. By doing so, Bach telescopes focus toward the cross.

<sup>33</sup> It is uncharacteristic of Bach to combine winds and strings during recitative. Phillip Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach, His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany*. (London: Novello, 1951), 351.

<sup>34</sup> Text of Chorale Tune:  
*Christ, you lamb of God,  
 you who take away the sins of the world,  
 have mercy on us!  
 Christ, you lamb of God,  
 you who take away the sins of the world  
 grant us your peace. Amen.*

**Figure 5.** Major Formal Divisions of Movement Two

|             |            |                      |            |            |
|-------------|------------|----------------------|------------|------------|
|             | 1          | 6                    | 11         | 15         |
| Measures    | 5<br>(2+3) | 5<br>(2+3)           | 5<br>(2+3) | 5<br>(2+3) |
| Tonality    | A $\flat$  | c f                  | E $\flat$  |            |
| Function    | VI/c       | Modulatory<br>(mod.) | III/c      |            |
| <i>Text</i> | 1–2        | 3–4                  | 5          |            |

This movement acts as an intimate transition. The sostenuto of the chorale, a foil to the drama of the recitative, seems to suspend the listener in time. Harmonically, Bach exploits the relationship of a third. In this movement, he descends from the first movement’s final tonality of C minor to

open in A $\flat$  major. Bach never strays far from the C-minor axis, to which he returns for the cadence in m. 6. The portal now swings in the opposite direction, and E $\flat$  becomes the tonal center. The final perfect authentic cadence indicates the hope of the believer.

### *Movement Three*

**Figure 6.** Movement Three Overview

| <i>Type</i> | <i>Form</i> | <i>Key</i>      | <i>Meter</i> | <i>Tempo</i> | <i>Forces</i>   |
|-------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|---|
| Chorus      | Ritornello  | E $\flat$ major | 3/4          | No Mark      | SATB Chorus<br>TB soli<br>Oboe 1 & 2<br>Violin 1&2<br>Viola<br>Basso Continuo |

### *Text and Translation*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>1 <i>Aller Augen warten, Herr,</i><br/>         2 <i>Du allmächtger Gott, auf dich,</i><br/>         3 <i>Und die meinen sonderlich.</i><br/>         4 <i>Gib denselben Kraft und Licht,</i><br/>         5 <i>Laß sie nicht immerdar in Finsternissen!</i><br/>         6 <i>Künftig soll dein Wink allein</i><br/>         7 <i>Der geliebte Mittelpunkt aller ihrer Werke sein,</i><br/>         8 <i>Bis du sie einst durch den Tod</i><br/>         9 <i>Wiederum gedenkst zu schließen.</i></p> | <p>All eyes wait, Lord,<br/>         Almighty God, upon you,<br/>         and my eyes especially.<br/>         Give them strength and light,<br/>         do not leave them forever in darkness!<br/>         In future a sign from you alone shall be<br/>         the beloved focus of all their work<br/>         until once and for all in death<br/>         you decide to close them again.</p> |
|---|---|

The joyous third movement introduces the chorus. In a nine-part form, this movement consists of five ritornelli and four solo sections. In Bach's early cantatas, he rarely indicates the specific use of soli; BWV 23 is an exception.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Christoph Wolff writes, "There is no evidence of solo-tutti differentiation (i.e., alternation of soloists and ripienist in large-scale choruses) during the Weimar period, but there is

Like the preceding recitative, the ritornello is highly influenced by the chorale tune. This grand movement occupies over half of BWV 23.

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some for the performance of Cantata BWV 71 on the occasion of the council election in Mühlhausen, and later for the performance of Cantatas BWV 22 and 23 for Bach's audition as cantor in Leipzig," in "Choir and Instruments" in *The World of Bach Cantatas*, 148.

**Figure 7.** Major Formal Divisions of Movement Three

|          | 1         | 32        | 46        | 61            | 77  | 85    | 97  | 105       | 129           | 153 |
|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------------|-----|-------|-----|-----------|---------------|-----|
| Measures | 31        | 14        | 15        | 16            | 8   | 12    | 8   | 24        | 25            |     |
|          | (8+8+7+8) | (7+7)     | (8+7)     | (3+8+5)       |     | (6+6) |     | (6+6+7+5) | (8+8+9)       |     |
| Tonality | E $\flat$ | B $\flat$ | B $\flat$ | B $\flat$ – f | f   | c     | c   | g         | g – E $\flat$ |     |
| Function | I         | V         | V         | Mod.          | ii  | vi    | vi  | iii       | iii – I       |     |
| Thematic | R1        | A         | R2        | B             | R3  | C     | R4  | D         | R5            |     |
| Text     | 1-2       | 3         | 1-2       | 4-5           | 1-2 | 6-7   | 1-2 | 8-9       | 1-2           |     |

Bach begins and ends this movement with E $\flat$  as tonic. Over the course of the movement, he explores a larger tonal palette. He divides this movement into two halves; with 153 measures total, the central ritornello of the movement occurs in measure 77. Bach spends the first half in major; the second half deals largely in minor, preparing the listener for the final movement. Five ritornelli act as the seams of this extended movement. Bach has interspersed four duets for tenor and bass between the ritornelli. Like the ritornelli, these interludes become increasingly complex and chromatic moving toward center of the movement. At the center (m. 77 of 153), Bach shifts to F

minor, the axis of the cantata. The subsequent sections, both ritornelli and soli, appear in minor. Following eight bars of transitional material in the orchestra, the final ritornello concludes in the original key of E $\flat$ .

Bach deploys a ritornello of joy and realism. Four components coalesce to form the structure: the chorale tune, a countermelody, a minuet figure, and a harmonic-contrapuntal completion. As the foundation, he presents the chorale tune in augmentation.

**Example 5.** Ritornello, Movement Three, mm. 12-20, Bass Voice



In the fourth bar, Bach interpolates the chiastic figure. In doing so, Bach combines the text “*Aller Augen warten,*” (All eyes look) with a

musical rendering of the cross. He places the countermelody in the soprano.

**Example 6.** Ritornello, Movement Three, mm. 12-20, Soprano Voice



With guarded optimism, it ascends in a joyous sweep, only to hesitate on the prominent lowered seventh (D $\flat$ ). Born of the promise of salvation and tempered by the sadness of Christ’s sacrifice,

this melody reflects the bittersweet nature of the Lenten season. The minuet figure reflects a dignified and graceful quality.

**Example 7.** Ritornello, Movement Three, mm. 12-20, Tenor Voice



Finally, the varying fourth component acts as a harmonization to the countermelody. Together, these frame each ritornello.

The opening 77 measures present several expressive techniques. Bach deals mainly in E $\flat$  and B $\flat$  major, with subsections of varying texture. In the first episode of solo writing, Bach creates a pattern to which he adheres for the movement. The tenor and bass dance in canon, calling and responding to one another. The ritornelli emerge from the divergence of the solo writing to remind the congregation that Christ is the author of salvation with the text “*Aller augen...*” Of the six ritornelli present, five include the chorale tune,<sup>36</sup> always in the bass voice (or continuo). The sixth ritornello does not. Here (mm. 54–60), Bach prepares the listener for the murky waters of the second half. He omits the chorale tune, leading to the transitional material of mm. 61–76. The text of mm. 61–76 begins with a request for strength and light, “*Gib denselben Kraft und Licht*”. The brief cadence (A $\flat$ ) on the downbeat of m. 64 acts as a pivot chord, introducing a highly significant shift to the subdominant axis of F minor. The oboes confirm this modulation. Now, the voices share a brief dialogue with the oboe. More significantly, this is one of two gestures in which the voices are not in canon, but act as one instrument. In the following measures, Bach distorts the previous tonal security with chromaticism introduced on the word *Finsternissen* (darkness). He furthers the disorientation by bringing the tenor and the bass into close proximity to one another, twisting, turning and crossing, depicting the confusion of blindness caused by separation from God.

Reflecting his carefully constructed design, Bach enacts several transformations in the second half. He reassigns the contrapuntal roles in the central ritornello (m. 77), placing the chorale

<sup>36</sup> Each chorale tune includes an interpolated chiasmic figure.

tune prominently in the soprano, oboes, and first violins. In a dramatic departure, the chorale tune mutates to minor, including the leap of a tritone between mm. 79 and 80. The angular nature of this version signals a shift. The F-minor section is short, yet potent. The following solo sections continue with dissonance and chromaticism. Now in C minor, Bach imbeds the chorale tune in the alto voice, maintaining the prominent augmented fourth. In mm. 85–96 and mm. 105–116, Bach paints a stark picture, eliminating all instruments but soloists and continuo.

Bach uses two tools to emphasize the doctrinally critical text, “*durch den Tod*” (for all in death). For the second and final time, the voices are paired homorhythmically, acting as one entity. This brings clarity to the text declamation. In m. 119, the tenor sounds a tritone above the bass on the word “*Tod*”, sustaining this interval for four beats. Bach infuses the text with the anguish and pain of this most dissonant interval. At the brink of hopelessness, he slowly refocuses on the hope of the cross. Above, the oboe presents the countermelody in fragmentation. The voices break free, and transition from “*Tod*” (death) to hope in the subsequent ritornello. Here, the chorale tune returns in the tenor voice, reflecting the original version.<sup>37</sup> Bach restores the countermelody to the soprano line. In m. 137, the orchestra executes a transition, and then, the final ritornello heralds the hope of restoration in its original key and voicing. While this movement ends in E $\flat$ -major, the internal tonal areas point to the pain caused by sin, increasing the connection to the cross.

<sup>37</sup> Most easily heard in the soprano voice of mm. 79–80, this gesture corresponds to mm. 131–132 in the tenor voice, and mm. 147–148 in the bass voice, with Bach omitting the tritone and approaching the chiasmic figure by step.

## Movement Four

Figure 8. Movement Four Overview

| Type    | Form     | Key        | Meter | Tempo   | Forces |
|---------|----------|------------|-------|---------|--------|
| Chorale | Strophic | g minor/   | C     | Adagio  | Tutti  |
| Chorus  |          | modulatory |       | Andante |        |

### Text and Translation

*Christe, du Lamm Gottes,  
Der du trägst die Sünd der Welt,  
Erbarm dich unser!  
Christe, du Lamm Gottes,  
Der du trägst die Sünd der Welt,  
Gib uns dein' Frieden. Amen.*

Christ, you lamb of God,  
you who take away the sins of the world,  
have mercy on us!  
Christ, you lamb of God,  
you who take away the sins of the world  
grant us your peace. Amen.

Scholars have referred to this final movement as both a chorale fantasia chorus and a figural chorale.<sup>38</sup> Problems arise in labeling, as no universal terminology exists.<sup>39</sup> Charles Sanford Terry labels it a Choral Fantasia. Acknowledging Cantata 23 as an exception to the rule, he states that the chorale fantasia would typically open the cantata, coloring and defining the whole,

The Leipzig Cantatas are distinguished generally from those of the earlier periods of Bach's activity by the magnificent Choral Fantasias which he introduced into them, generally as their opening movement...

<sup>38</sup> Christoph Wolff, *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music*, 128.

<sup>39</sup> A figural chorale is defined as, "an organ chorale (or chorale prelude) in which a distinct figure or motif is exploited in one or another contrapuntal part throughout the piece, usually below the cantus firmus but not obviously derived from it. As such the term is sometimes used for a type of organ chorale found in (e.g.) Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* (1713–15)." Peter Williams and Robin A. Leaver, "Figural Choral," *Grove Music Online* (accessed February 10, 2012), [http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.lib-e2.lib.ttu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/09624?q=figural+chorale&search=quick&pos=17&\\_start=1#firsthit](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.lib-e2.lib.ttu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/09624?q=figural+chorale&search=quick&pos=17&_start=1#firsthit).

Like the first movement of the Concerto, the Choral Fantasia colours and defines the whole Cantata. Its grand purpose was, in Spitta's words, 'the perfect poetic and musical development of a particular Hymn by means of all the artistic material which Bach had assimilated by a thorough study of the art of his own and former times.' In the Choral Fantasia, the hymn, words and melody, is presented with all the technique of Bach's mature genius. It is perfect and complete in itself, and yet a detail in an ordered whole... With few exceptions all (choral fantasias) are the opening movement of a Cantata... The exceptions are ... No. 23 (among others), which is the concluding movement.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Charles Sanford Terry, *Bach's Chorals: Part II The Hymns and Hymn Melodies of the Cantatas and Motets*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1917), 35-37.

Christoff Wolff calls movement four a figural chorale.<sup>41</sup> Strictly defined by Grove Music Online, a figured chorale is,

An organ chorale (or chorale prelude) in which a distinct figure or motif is exploited in one or another contrapuntal part throughout the piece, usually below the cantus firmus but not obviously derived from it. As such the term is sometimes used for a type of organ chorale found in (e.g.) Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* (1713-15)<sup>42</sup>

Both definitions intersect with some aspect of this movement. As described by Terry, the choral fantasia acts as a generator for the tone of the cantata, "colouring" and "defining" the whole. We can see the influence of the chorale tune in three of the four movements: the cantus firmus in the

<sup>41</sup> Christoph Wolff, *Essays on His Life and Music*, 128.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Williams and Robin A. Leaver, "Figural Choral," Grove Music Online (accessed February 10, 2012), [http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.lib-e2.lib.ttu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/09624?q=figural+chorale&search=quick&pos=17&\\_start=1#firsthit](http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.lib-e2.lib.ttu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/09624?q=figural+chorale&search=quick&pos=17&_start=1#firsthit).

oboes and first violins of the second movement, the structural foundation of the ritornello in the third movement, and the prominent cantus firmus of the final chorale. In the case of the first movement, we can see the structural reflection of the final movement in the larger scope of the cantata, as both prioritize the subdominant at the same ratio of measures. The fourth movement also reflects Wolff's assessment, particularly in the first statement of the chorale. The orchestra maintains independent figures while the choir offers the chorale. After m. 19, the opening orchestral figures give way to a largely *colla parte* texture.

The German *Agnus Dei*, "Christe, du Lamm Gottes" would commonly be sung during communion. This text is the only direct reference to scripture in the libretto, a reminder of Bach's attention to the orthodoxy. In the Gospel of John (1:29)<sup>43</sup>, John the Baptist exclaims, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

<sup>43</sup> Lamb imagery is also derived from passages in Isaiah (53:7) and in Jeremiah (11:19).

**Figure 9.** Major Formal Divisions of Movement Four

|                |  |   |   |      |      |   |    |           |    |      |   |      |           |      |    |        |    |   |   |
|----------------|--|---|---|------|------|---|----|-----------|----|------|---|------|-----------|------|----|--------|----|---|---|
| Measures       | 1                                      | 5 | 9 | 12.3 | 14.3 | 19.3                                      | 25 | 28        | 32 | 35.3 | 38.3                                      | 43.3 | 46        | 48.3 | 51 | 53.3   | 58 |   |   |
|                | 18.5<br>(4+4+3.5+2+5)                  |   |   |      |      | 19<br>(3+2.5+3+4+3.5+3)                   |    |           |    |      | 15<br>(5+5+5)                             |      |           |      |    | 5.5    |    |   |   |
| Function       | v/Mod.                                 |   |   |      |      | Modulatory                                |    |           |    |      | Modulatory                                |      |           |      |    | IV – I |    |   |   |
| Tonality       | g                                      |   | c |      |      | F/f                                       |    | B $\flat$ | g  | D    | g   | F    | B $\flat$ | g    | c  | D      | F  | F | C |
| <i>Chorale</i> | <i>Soprano B<math>\flat</math> m.5</i> |   |   |      |      | <i>Soprano B<math>\flat</math> m.19.3</i> |    |           |    |      | <i>Soprano B<math>\flat</math> m.38.3</i> |      |           |      |    |        |    |   |   |
| <i>Tune</i>    |  |   |   |      |      | <i>Oboes F m.20</i>                       |    |           |    |      | <i>Violins B<math>\flat</math> m.38.3</i> |      |           |      |    |        |    |   |   |
|                |  |   |   |      |      | <i>Violins D m. 21</i>                    |    |           |    |      |   |      |           |      |    |        |    |   |   |

While Bach offers three settings of this text, he creates two levels of formal division. The structural division exists on the textual plane. Already prefigured in the second movement, the appearances of the chorale tune here act as the structural boundaries. One repetition functions as one third of the movement (in measures). Orchestral writing frames the iterations. The initial homophonic statement follows a funeral march in the orchestra. The second presents as a canon in the sopranos, oboes and first violins. The third pairs with a new and vibrant counter melody in the oboes. Each repetition functions as one third of the movement (in measures). Bach creates a secondary level of formal division by adjusting the tempo. In m. 19, the initial adagio gives way to a final andante. In essence, the final two-thirds of the music are doubled in speed. Because of this tempo shift, m.19 becomes the sonic midpoint, with equal time on either side.

Bach pairs the first full statement of the chorale with the continued development of the material found in the first four bars. The homorhythmic pulse of the opening strings can be heard as Christ's walk to the cross, emphasizing the oppression of sin. A foil to the expansive frame, Bach sets the chorale in a staid, four-part texture. By doing so, he communicates the theological significance and priority of this text. Between each line of text, he interpolates one and one half measures of figural punctuation. After the final line, he concludes the opening section with a postlude symmetrical to the opening. Averting expectation in the final cadence of the chorale, Bach surprises with a second statement of the same text, coupled with an active counterpoint and a new tempo.

In his second setting of the chorale (mm. 19–35), Bach creates a canon of three voices. The sopranos deliver the first notes of the cantus firmus

with B $\flat$  as the tonic. Two beats later, the oboes assume priority, beginning their cantus firmus on F. Finally, the violins offer one executed in D major. The remaining voices in the orchestra support the lower three voices. Bach continues with short interpolations between lines of the chorale. In his most extended realization of the tonal axis, Bach emphasizes the subdominant of C (F) in mm. 33–35.

The canonic statement of the final strophe ushers in a march of hope. For the first time, Bach presents the final line of the chorale text, "*Gib uns dein' Frieden*" (*Grant us your peace*). He maintains the prominence of the chorale tune in the soprano voice, doubled by the violins. Rhythmically vital, the oboes' joyous counter figure prepares the arrival of the final amen. In this gesture, Bach encapsulates the Lutheran theology. He brings the listener from tragedy to peace. He transforms the death march of the opening sequence into the concluding dance of joy and freedom. In final bars, he confirms the significance of the subdominant by choosing a plagal cadence.

(Figure 10 on next page)

**Figure 10.** Setting and Harmonization of the Hymn “Christe, du Lamm Gottes”

| Measure | Iteration | <i>Chri-</i>               | <i>ste</i>           | <i>du</i>                    | <i>Lamm</i>                | <i>Got-</i>                | <i>tes</i>                 |                  |                         |            |                             |                         |          |          |                         |          |
|---------|-----------|----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|----------|----------|-------------------------|----------|
| Tune    |           | <b>B<math>\flat</math></b> | <b>C</b>             | <b>D</b>                     | <b>D</b>                   | <b>E<math>\flat</math></b> | <b>D</b>                   |                  |                         |            |                             |                         |          |          |                         |          |
| 5       | 1         | g                          | F                    | B $\flat$                    | b $^{\circ 7}$             | c                          | a $^{\circ 2}$             | D $^6$           | G                       | D          |                             |                         |          |          |                         |          |
| 19.3    | 2         | B $\flat$                  | c $^{4-2}$           | B $\flat$                    | G                          | a $^{\circ 4-2}$           | f $\sharp^{\circ}$         | g                | g $^{4-2}$              | D          | B $\flat^6$                 | E $\flat$               | c $^6$   | D        |                         |          |
| 38.3    | 3         | B $\flat$                  | C $^{6-5}$           | B $\flat$                    | D                          | E $\flat^{4-2}$            | a $^{\circ 6}$             | D                | B $\flat^{4-2}$         | G $^{6-4}$ | D                           | g                       |          |          |                         |          |
|         |           | <i>der</i>                 | <i>Du</i>            | <i>trägst</i>                | <i>Die</i>                 | <i>Sünd</i>                | <i>der</i>                 | <i>Welt</i>      |                         |            |                             |                         |          |          |                         |          |
| Tune    |           | <b>D</b>                   | <b>C</b>             | <b>D</b>                     | <b>E<math>\flat</math></b> | <b>F</b>                   | <b>E<math>\flat</math></b> | <b>D</b>         |                         |            |                             |                         |          |          |                         |          |
| 9       | 1         | g                          | C $^6$               | D $^6$                       | G                          | F $^6$                     | c                          | G                |                         |            |                             |                         |          |          |                         |          |
| 25      | 2         | g                          | f $\sharp^{\circ}$   | D $^6$                       | C                          | d                          | E $\flat^{4-2}$            | D                | e $^{\circ 4-2}$        | D $^{4-2}$ | g $^6$                      | D $^6$                  | g $^6$   | D        |                         |          |
| 43.3    | 3         | g                          | c $^6$               | B $\flat$                    | C                          | d $^{\circ 4-2}$           | A $\flat^6$                | d $^{\circ 4-2}$ | G $^6$                  | c          | d $^{\circ 6-5}$            | c                       |          |          |                         |          |
|         |           | <i>er-</i>                 | <i>barm</i>          | <i>Dich</i>                  | <i>un-</i>                 | <i>ser</i>                 |                            |                  |                         |            |                             |                         |          |          |                         |          |
| Tune    |           | <b>D</b>                   | <b>C</b>             | <b>B<math>\flat</math> C</b> | <b>D</b>                   | <b>C</b>                   |                            |                  |                         |            |                             |                         |          |          |                         |          |
| 12.2    | 1         |                            | G                    | c                            | E $\flat$                  | B $\flat$                  | g $^7$                     | C $^{4-2}$       | C $^7$                  | F          |                             |                         |          |          |                         |          |
| 32      | 2         | g                          | G                    | a $^{\circ 4-2}$             | g                          | g $^6$                     | B $\flat^6$                | <b>F</b>         | <b>F<math>^6</math></b> | <b>C</b>   | <b>C<math>^{4-2}</math></b> | <b>f<math>^6</math></b> | <b>f</b> | <b>f</b> | <b>C<math>^7</math></b> | <b>F</b> |
|         |           | <i>gib</i>                 | <i>uns</i>           | <i>Dein'</i>                 | <i>Frie-</i>               | <i>den!</i>                |                            |                  |                         |            |                             |                         |          |          |                         |          |
| 48.3    | 3         | D                          | f $\sharp^{\circ 6}$ | D $^6$                       | g                          | B $\flat$                  | g $^6$                     | C                | F $^6$                  | F $^{6-4}$ | C $^7$                      | F                       |          |          |                         |          |

Figure 10 depicts the three harmonizations employed by Bach. Each box in the figure represents one beat, making it possible to assess the amount of music Bach assigned to each strophe. When examined, a few patterns emerge. The opening strophe is the shortest. The second strophe receives the most music, as Bach always extends the activity of the alto, tenor and bass on the final syllable. Finally, Bach reserves the perfect authentic cadence for each harmonization of the third line of text. In each instance (measures 12.2, 32, and 48.3), he cadences in F major. In fact, the only perfect authentic cadences that correspond with the chorale tune move from a C $^7$  harmony to F (both major and minor modes). In the case of m. 35, Bach strikingly repeats the same two chords (C major and either F major or minor) for nine beats, boldly emphasizing the subdominant.

Here, the *Agnus Dei* becomes the final prayer of the work, bearing witness to all of Bach’s compositional power. With full forces, he utilizes both a four-voice style and cantus-firmus technique. Bach brings the cantata full circle, initially introducing the chorale in the instruments of the second movement, augmenting the tune in the ritornello of the third movement, and finally stating it in both the voices and instruments of the fourth movement. The ancient melody becomes the final prayer of the work.

When considered through this lens, the structure inspires extraordinary meaning and intimacy—both a prayer for God’s sovereign will and a theological statement. Its design confirms Bach’s painstaking care and intention as he approached this audition, and its structure reflects his intimate knowledge of scripture and theology. Within its



four-movement framework, the cantata establishes man's separation from God, an individual and communal recognition of need, and the final triumph of Christ's sacrifice.

### *Summary*

While we will never know with certainty the details of Bach's audition, we can conjecture. In gathering the evidence—his love of numerical symbolism, personal notations in the Calov bible, circumstance, source materials, and structural design—we are closer, and we are honored to briefly glimpse the private life of one of music's most enigmatic characters. Perhaps no other composer has enjoyed the breadth and depth of influence on future generations. We look to him as a source of artistic, intellectual, and spiritual inspiration. His work continues to capture us, and the mysteries not yet fully explored

summon the curious to further pursuit. Even the most unassuming of Bach's works holds the possibility of rich discovery and transformation for the musician. This is why pages, years, and lifetimes are dedicated to the study of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Bach's absolute dedication to his faith as manifest in his music presents a marvel in the history of Western art. The dimension of liturgical service so central to Bach's ambitions confounds modern sensibility. In him, a humble servant exists whose spiritual depth grasped the very essence of human struggle and triumph. Here, one of the great geniuses in the history of world dedicated himself tirelessly to the creation of a "well-regulated" church music. His humility rings true. As Bach stated, he "cast his lot." A profound and deeply personal expression of worship, his artful design of Cantata 23 still defers to the sovereignty of God.

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