



Pearson

J.S. Bach: *Cantata Ein feste Burg, BWV 80:* Movements 1, 2, 8 (for component 3: Appraising)

Background information and performance circumstances

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) is widely regarded as one of the greatest composers of the Baroque period and has a prolific output of compositions. Many of Bach's compositions are of a sacred nature and were produced for the churches where he held the position of director of music. In 1723 Bach moved to Leipzig to take up the position of Cantor of St Thomas Church (Thomaskirche), where he remained for the next 27 years. It was here that he composed some of his most renowned works, including the Passions (most notably the St Matthew and St John Passions), the B minor Mass and *Christmas Oratorio*, in addition to a vast quantity of cantatas. The cantata was an integral part of the Lutheran liturgy and followed immediately after the reading of the Gospel.

A cantata is a vocal composition with instrumental accompaniment and comprises many movements. Cantatas were originally written using both sacred and secular texts, but it was in Germany in the Baroque period where they became most associated with the Lutheran Church.

Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott (A mighty fortress is our God), BWV 80, is a church cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach. He composed this chorale cantata, in which both text and music are based on a Lutheran hymn, whilst in the position of Cantor of St Thomas Church in Leipzig. It is based on Martin Luther's hymn of the same name. It uses a cantus firmus, which translates as 'fixed song', and is a pre-existing melody forming the basis of a polyphonic composition.

The precise date of composition for this cantata is largely unknown. However, it is known that it was written for Reformation Day: a feast day in the Protestant Church celebrated on 31st October. This cantata was first performed between 1727 and 1731 and was probably composed either in 1723 or between 1728 and 1731. It is based on the earlier cantata *Alles, was von Gott geboren*, which was produced in Weimar in 1715 or 1716 for the fourth Sunday after Easter.

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The cantata consists of eight movements:

1. Chorus: *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*
2. Aria and duet (bass and soprano): *Alles, was von Gott geboren*
3. Recitative and arioso (bass): *Erwäge doch, Kind Gottes*
4. Aria (soprano): *Komm in mein Herzenshaus*
5. Chorale: *Und wenn die Welt voll Teufel wär*
6. Recitative and arioso (tenor): *So stehe denn bei Christi blutgefärbten Fahne*
7. Duetto (alto, tenor): *Wie selig sind doch die, die Gott im Munde tragen*
8. Chorale: *Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn*

Performing forces and their handling

The cantata is scored for four vocal soloists (soprano, alto, tenor and bass), a four-part SATB choir, three oboes, and violin 1 and 2. Unusually, in this cantata, Bach writes for 'Violoncello e cembalo' and 'Violone e organo'. In this recording, a sackbut strengthens the lower part. J.S. Bach's son Wilhelm Friedemann Bach later added trumpet parts which give an additional sense of grandeur.

First movement

This is scored for SATB choir and tutti orchestra. The vocal lines are closely doubled by the orchestra.

Second movement

This aria is a duet for soprano and bass with string accompaniment and solo oboe. The oboe essentially doubles the soprano line, which provides the chorale melody but with additional ornamentation. The bass sings an almost independent aria.

Eighth movement

This chorale is for four-part SATB choir with orchestral accompaniment which exactly doubles the vocal lines.

Texture

First movement

- The texture is highly contrapuntal and written in a fugal style.
- At the start of the movement there are fugal entries which are presented in a layered manner building up from tenor, alto, soprano and finally bass.
- It is fugal with the subject presented in the tenor part (bars 1–3) and again in the soprano part in bar 6.
- The tonal answer is presented on the fifth degree of the scale, down a fourth in the alto part in bar 3 and the bass in bar 8.

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- There is a countersubject, which is based on the second phrase of Luther’s hymn tune in bar 4 (tenor, ‘ein gute Wehr’).
- In addition the unembellished cantus firmus of the chorale melody is played in Canon between the oboes and the second continuo part

Second movement

- The orchestral introduction and postlude have a melody-dominated homophony with the upper strings playing a semiquaver triadic line whilst the lower strings accompany with quaver offbeat leaps and a walking bass.
- The soprano and bass parts enter to form a highly contrapuntal texture, with the soprano singing a variation of the cantus firmus and the bass singing an ornate melody.
- The soprano and oboe often create a heterophonic texture.

Eighth movement

- Typically of a chorale, the texture is homophonic ~~chordal~~.

Text setting

- The vocal line frequently contains long melismatic passages in the first and second movements. This can be particularly seen in the second movement solo bass part (e.g. bars 9–10).
- The eighth movement chorale is typically entirely syllabic.

Melody

This cantata uses a cantus firmus, that is, a pre-existing melody forming the basis of a polyphonic composition. The cantata is based on bars 1–2 of Luther’s hymn tune composed in 1529.



First movement

Below is the main theme of theme of this movement which is based on the hymn tune by Martin Luther.



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You can see how closely it is related to the first phrase of the chorale from the eighth movement of the cantata with altered rhythm and the addition of passing notes. However, essentially the melodic shape is the same. The melody starts with repeated tonic notes in the key of D major before falling a fourth to the dominant and then rising back to the tonic.

- The melody is predominantly conjunct with only small leaps of a fourth or fifth.
- The theme is transposed down a fourth to provide an answer to the subject.
- There are some ascending sequences (e.g. bar 11 in violin 1).
- Much of the melody is diatonic but with some chromaticism (e.g. bar 99).
- The SATB choir covers a wide range:
 - Soprano: range of an eleventh (D to G#)
 - Alto: range of a twelfth (G to D)
 - Tenor: range of an eleventh (E to A)
 - Bass: range of a twelfth (A to E).

Second movement



Here the soprano soloist sings an ornamented version of the chorale melody but essentially the melodic line is distinct.

- Much of the soloists' lines are scalic, although there are some more angular moments (e.g. in bars 51–52 in bass).
- The bass line is highly scalic with melismatic running semiquavers and is considerably more ornate than the soprano melody.
- There are very few examples of sequences (e.g. a descending sequence in bar 19 in continuo).
- Trills occur for oboe and soprano in bar 26.
- The soprano and bass soloists cover a range of:
 - soprano: range of a ninth (D to E)
 - bass: range of almost two octaves (F# to E).

Eighth movement



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The melody in this movement bears most resemblance to that of Luther’s original hymn tune.

- The melody is conjunct and diatonic, which is typical of a hymn tune, with only very occasional small leaps.
- The SATB choir covers a reasonably narrow range:
 - soprano: range of an octave (D to D)
 - alto: range of a ninth (A to B)
 - tenor: range of an eleventh (E to A)
 - bass: range of a 2 octaves (D to D).

Structure and tonality

Overall the key of the cantata is D major with modulations to closely related keys.

First movement

Bars 1–16	<p>Bars 1-30 represent bars 1-4 of mvt. 8</p> <p>Starts in the tonic key of D major with a brief modulation to A major (dominant) and returning to the tonic in bar 3. The theme cantus firmus/chorale melody is announced as each of the parts enter. There is a short modulation to G major (subdominant) in bar 12, passing through A major and returning to the tonic in bar 16.</p> <p>Most noticeable is the unornamented cantus firmus, used in canon between the oboes and violone and organo which guides us through the individual phrases of the Chorale melody from mvt.8</p>
Bars 16–30	<p>The theme is announced now in the soprano against the countersubject in the alto. Fragments of other phrases of the chorale are introduced and other vocal lines become scalic and melismatic. This section ends with a long tonic pedal note (bar 27).</p>
Bar 30–45	<p>Bars 30-60 represent the repeat of bars 1-4 form mvt 8</p> <p>This section starts with the subject in the tonic key in the tenor, followed by the answer in the alto (bar 33), the subject in the soprano (bar 35) and the answer in the bass (bar 38). Ascending sequences follow in the soprano part. It mainly stays in the tonic with only brief glimpses of A major and G major.</p>

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Bar 46–60	The subject is heard in the tonic in the soprano, followed by the answer in bar 48 in the bass and then the subject in the tenor. There is a modulation to G major in bar 51, before returning to D major in bar 53. This section ends with a long tonic pedal note (bar 57).
Bar 60–82	New thematic material is announced (based on phrase 5 of mvt 8), which starts with a leap of a perfect fifth before becoming conjunct. This is heard first in the bass, then tenor, alto and finally soprano. The music becomes highly modulatory, when phrase 6 of mvt 8 is represented, as it passes briefly through related minor keys such as F# minor (bar 73) and then to B minor (bar 75), E minor (bar 76), back to B minor (bar 78) and returning to A major in bar 80.
Bar 82–90	New thematic material is introduced (7 th phrase from mvt 8) with a melody which starts with three minims followed by a semibreve before moving into quavers. It starts in A major and swiftly moves through F sharp Minor and B Minor before returning to A major at bar 88.
Bar 90–100	Melodic material based on phrase 8 from mvt. 8 commences here, starting with three minims but followed by crotchet-based rhythms. It is announced first in the soprano, then alto, followed by tenor and then bass. It passes through related minor keys. At the end of the section it reaches a chromatic climax.
Bar 100–114	This section starts back in the tonic key with a melody in the tenor, closely related to the opening theme, announced in the different parts. (based on both phrases 1 and 2 from mvt. 8) Passing modulations return to the tonic key for the remainder of the movement. Embellished versions of phrases of the chorale are presented and with a final tonic pedal note the movement comes to a majestic close. Notable is the fact that the SATB choir have returned to both phrases 1 and 2 from mvt 8, whereas the the oboe canon only uses the 9 th phrase (which is also phrase 2)

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Second movement

Throughout the movement, the soprano sings a mildly embellished version of the chorale tune, whilst the bass sings an aria, both ornate and demanding.

Bars 1–8 Orchestral Introduction	The upper strings play a lively semiquaver leaping melody accompanied by a strong quaver bass line, often starting on the offbeat. It begins in the tonic key of D major before modulating to the dominant, A major in bar 4, briefly passing through G major in bar 5 before returning to the tonic.
Bars 9–23	The bass enters first with an ornate melismatic line of scalic semiquavers followed a bar later by the soprano with an embellished version of the cantus firmus (phrases 1 and 2). It starts in D major and modulates to A major in bar 12. At bar 15 the soprano sings an embellished version of phrase 2 of the chorale hymn tune. Bar 19 onwards is a solo for the bass.
Bars 24–37	Repeat of bars 10–23 (with slight variations, especially in the first couple of bars).
Bars 37–60	Starts in D major but soon modulates to A major in bar 38. This section modulates rapidly through a variety of closely related keys such as B minor (bar 53) and F# minor bar 60 (phrases 5–8 of the chorale).
Bars 60–69	The orchestra plays music from the opening as the piece returns to D major. The vocal parts are similar to the start but the soprano sings a developed version of the cantus firmus (phrase 9) but with chromatic movement at the same time as the bass moves in semiquavers.
Bars 69–76	Orchestral music from the introduction (in D major).

Eighth movement

Bars 1–4	Two 2-bar phrases repeated. There is a brief modulation to A major at the end of the first phrase in bar 2 before returning to the tonic key of D major.
Bars 5–12	This section consists of five phrases. It starts in D major, although modulating to the dominant key, A major, in both bars 5 and 8, although after the perfect cadence swiftly returns to the tonic. In bar 9 the music moves through G major in order to reach the relative minor key of E minor in bar 10.

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Harmony

- Chords are diatonic and functional.
- Perfect cadences are frequent and are often used to confirm the modulation to a new key.
- There is a rare example of an imperfect cadence in bar 10 of the eighth movement.
- There is a long tonic pedal note for 4 bars at the end of the first movement.
- Typical of the Baroque period, suspensions occur and an example of a 4–3 suspension can be found in bar 16 (first movement).
- Secondary and dominant sevenths occur frequently.
- Most chords are in root position or first inversion, although second inversions are used.

Tempo, metre and rhythm

First movement

- The metre is 4/2 and is simple quadruple time.
- The rhythms vary from semibreves through to quavers.
- Melismatic passages often contain continuous quavers (e.g. bars 22–24).
- Tied notes occur in the main theme and give a forward drive to the music.
- There are occasional dotted rhythms.

Second movement

- The metre is common time, otherwise known as 4/4 and is simple quadruple time.
- *Moto perpetuo* semiquavers are used in the opening.
- The rhythms are predominantly semiquavers for the bass soloist.
- Intricate decorative passagework includes demisemiquavers, dotted rhythms and syncopations.

Eighth movement

- The metre is common time, otherwise known as 4/4. (simple quadruple)
- The movement starts with an anacrusis (upbeat).
- Typical of chorales, pauses are present at the end of each phrase where the cadence occurs and this halts the tempo.
- The predominant rhythm is in crotchets. Quavers occur where there are passing notes.

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