

Bach Cantata Project – MUS770
Spring 2015

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Cantata Examined: *Sehet, welch eine Liebe hat uns der Vater erzeiget* (Behold, what a love has the Father shown to us), BWV 64

Introduction

This cantata, newly written by Bach (unlike its predecessor for Christmas day, BWV 63, which was written in Weimar), was first performed just after Advent season, on December 27, 1723, which was also the Lutheran Feast Day for John the Apostle. It was written in response to the prescribed readings for the day, the epistle to the Hebrews 1:1-14 (God spoke through Christ, who is better than the angels) and the gospel of John 1:1-14 (In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was made flesh).¹

The order of the eight movements is: Chorus – 1st Chorale – Alto Recitative – 2nd Chorale – Soprano Aria – Bass Recitative – Alto Aria – 3rd Chorale. The use of three chorales in a single cantata is somewhat unusual for Bach, but for the 1723 Advent season he did this three times (in BWV 40, 64 and 153). It has been suggested that this was done partially as a practical matter, allowing Bach's choristers to sing the chorales without much preparation, given the busy Christmas performance schedule.²

Textual considerations

The text of BWV 64 is based on a libretto of Johann Knauer, published as early as 1720, but for this cantata considerably shortened, with two chorales added. The literary sources for each movement are as follows:³

1. Chorus: Bible passage 1 John 3:1 (“Behold, what a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God”)
2. 1st Chorale: last verse of Martin Luther’s hymn of 1524 *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ* (*Das hat er alles uns getan*: God’s love is shown in Christ’s birth) – added to libretto
3. Alto Recitative: from the libretto (rejecting the riches of the world in view of possessing heaven’s riches)
4. 2nd Chorale: opening verse of Balthasar Kindermann’s 1667 hymn *Was frag ich nach der Welt* (the world is rejected for the pleasure of having Jesus) – added to libretto
5. Soprano Aria: from the libretto (the world’s riches pass away “like smoke”, but Jesus’ gifts are eternal)
6. Bass Recitative: from the libretto (Christ’s birth makes heaven certain, even as I yearn for it)
7. Alto Aria: from the libretto (the world is surrendered for heaven and eternal life)
8. 3rd Chorale: fifth verse of Johann Franck’s hymn of 1650 *Jesu, meine Freude* (*Gute Nacht, o Wesen*: the world and this life is bid farewell).

Curiously, this cantata makes almost no reference to the readings for the day. The text for the opening chorus is 1 John 3:1, appropriately for the Feast Day of John the Apostle. The verse of the first chorale is taken from a Christmas hymn of Luther’s. However, the

rest of the cantata has nothing to do with the Christmas story. Instead, its focus is on God's love through Christ as compared to "the world," and how the children of God should not care for worldly things, being assured of eternal life. As is typical with Bach and his time, there is a linkage between the celebrations of Advent (or other celebratory occasions) and reflections on death and futility, and hope for the afterlife.⁴ Also of interest is the fact that, starting with the third movement (alto recitative) and continuing to the end, the text uses the first person singular "I" – that is, the individual believer – rather than first person plural "we" community of believers for the opening chorus and chorale. This parallels the change of focus, from that of Christ's birth to that of worldly renunciation, and perhaps was done intentionally, although I cannot be certain of this.

Given that the three chorales constitute the backbone of the cantata, there appears a certain progression of ideas. The first chorale praises what God has done for us; the second chorale questions the world's values; and the third chorale gives a farewell to material things and the world's "pride and pomp."⁵ In all three chorales, the SATB parts are doubled with strings and brass, similar to the opening chorus (see below).

Musical components

The cantatas for Bach's first *Jahrgang* (annual cantata cycle) share some common features with all the Leipzig cantatas, such as the grand choral opening, the expressive closing four-part chorale, and more standardized instrumentation including a four-part string section (although only three strings are indicated for BWV 64), and regular use of the new lower-register oboes such as the oboe d'amore.⁶

The opening chorus of BWV 64 is in a German motet style, that is, the four voices SATB are doubled by the strings and (mostly) brass, along with a single-line continuo, with no individual instrumental parts.⁷ Specifically, sopranos are doubled by a “cornettino” (a treble instrument of the cornetto family, not a brass instrument) and 1st violin; altos are doubled by a 1st trombone and 2nd violin; tenors are doubled by a 2nd trombone and viola; and basses are doubled by a 3rd trombone.⁸ The structure is fugal, the voices entering S-A-T-B, although the first two notes of the theme, on the word *Sehet* (Behold!), are sung by all four voices at the very beginning, to emphasize its importance and grab the attention of the listener. Its key of E minor and use of running melismatic 8th notes in the vocal parts gives the movement a serious and somewhat frenetic character.

The chorus is challenging in its extensive contrapuntal complexity. The doubling of each part by the brass would help alleviate this; as Wolff points out: “At the same time, [Bach] designed the cantatas for the lesser feasts in such a way as not to strain the choir unduly. For example, the difficult opening chorus of the cantata BWV 64 for the third day of Christmas has instruments (cornetto and trombones) supporting the choristers by doubling their parts, an expedient that would compensate for the lack of rehearsal time.”⁹

The first chorale *Das hat er alles uns getan* (All that he has done for us) in G major has a simple note-on-note accompaniment (matching the bass line almost exactly), so is the least ornate of the three chorales. It provides a nice contrast to the preceding chorus,

ending nicely on the last word “*Kyrieleis*” (an elision of *Kyrie* and *eleis(on)*), and including a mixolydian F natural for the altos in m. 9.

The secco recitative *Geh Welt! Behalte nur das Deine* (Go world! Keep what is thine) is sung by the alto, and is significant especially for its accompaniment, in rapid rising or falling scales of 16th notes that punctuate the alto’s phrases. These presage the same figures in the accompaniment to the soprano aria following the second chorale. Seven of these occurrences are rising, in keeping with the textual hope of being raised to heaven. The remaining three falling occurrences accompany the text which speaks to the transient possession of the world’s “gold”, so indicating its earthbound position.¹⁰ The last group of accompanying sixteenth notes leads without pause to the chorale which follows, since the alto’s words *Drum sag ich mit getrostem Mut*: (therefore I say with confident courage:) leads without pause to the following chorale text.

The second chorale *Was frag ich nach der Welt* (What do I care for the world) in D major features a dynamic accompaniment of continuous 8th notes (recalling the scale passages of the recitative), so distinguishing it from the simpler, less active first chorale.

The soprano aria *Was die Welt in sich hält* (What the world in itself contains) in B minor is centrally placed in the cantata, and this and the alto aria are its two longest movements. The form is that of a da capo ritornello aria, with a gavotte-like feeling, including cut time and a double upbeat. The scoring is light, with strings and single-line continuo accompanying the singer. The text gives a simple comparison between that which

doesn't last (which "like smoke" passes away) and that which is permanent (what Jesus gives). Musically, the world's impermanence is indicated by the 16th note figurations in the first violin, where what Jesus gives is indicated, at least initially, by a change to 8th note accompaniment and key change to A major. The movement has an ABA structure in support of the textual comparison, with the text about the world being the A section, the text about Jesus (starting in m. 50) being the B section, and the da capo (ending at the fermata, just before the text about Jesus) repeating the A section.

The second secco recitative *Der Himmel bleibet mir gewiss* (Heaven remains certain for me) is sung by the bass. Its accompaniment is much simpler than that of the alto recitative, consisting only of single notes which the continuo player fills in harmonically as appropriate.

The alto aria *Von der Welt verlang ich nichts* (From the world I desire nothing) is in G major (the first extended movement in a major key), and features the oboe d'amore accompanying the singer, which as noted above was frequently employed by Bach in his Leipzig cantatas. Like the soprano aria, it is in da capo form, and features a simple comparison of two sections of text, the first desiring nothing from the world, the second being assured of eternal life. Again like the soprano aria there is an ABA structure, the first A marked by the first textual section and B (starting in m. 50) marked by the second; the da capo then repeats the A section (up to the fermata).

The final chorale *Gute Nacht, o Wesen* (Good night, o existence) is in E minor. Its assertive message of farewell is supported by a more chromatic harmony than either of the cantata's two preceding chorales, with the bass line featuring an insistent pattern of two 8th notes followed (in all cases but one) by a quarter note.

Musical Rhetoric

Some examples of musical rhetoric have already been noted above: the emphasis on *Sehet* (Behold) in the opening chorus, the rising (towards heaven) and falling (to earth) 16th notes of the alto recitative, and the two da capo arias, with their ABA structure, the B section strongly contrasted with A in its key change and differing accompaniment to emphasize the comparisons between different textual sections.

Several more examples of “text painting” can be observed in the cantata, many of them in the central soprano aria:¹¹

- In the opening chorus, the word *erzeiget* (bestowed) is emphasized by the long melismas on its middle syllable. The initial phrase *Sehet, welch eine Liebe hat uns der Vater erzeiget* (Behold, what a love has to us the Father bestowed), ends with the key word, love being a gift of God. There is a similar melismatic emphasis on the last word of the second phrase *dass wir Gottes Kinder heissen* (that we God's children are called), so highlighting the calling in response to the bestowal.
- The running 8th note accompaniment in the second chorale has a feeling of movement that the first chorale lacks; this could suggest movement away from the world

towards Jesus, as per its text (What do I care for the world and all its treasures, if I myself only in thee, my Jesus, can delight!).

- The beginning of the A section of the soprano aria follows the text *Was die Welt in sich hält muss als wie ein Rauch vergehen* (what the world in itself contains, must pass away like smoke). The rising of smoke is indicated in two ways, by the use of rising 16th note accompaniments (and thus a different metaphorical meaning than that of the preceding alto recitative), and by a series of rising 8th notes, followed by silence (in the middle of the word!) used twice for the word *vergehen* (pass away) in mm. 37-40.
- The beginning of the B section of the soprano aria follows the text *Aber was mir Jesus gibt*, “But what Jesus gives me”. As already noted, this emphasizes the contrast with the initial text dealing with the world. In this case, the change to a major key, simplified accompaniment (a single line played by the three strings), and gentle high notes F#-E for the word *Jesus* give this text a beautiful backdrop. (I consider this the most beautiful moment of the entire cantata – too bad it isn’t repeated!)
- The text of the soprano aria B section continues with *bleibet fest und ewig stehen* (remains firm and eternally standing). Both words firm (*fest*) and standing (*stehen*) feature long held note values, so giving an emphasis of solidity to both.
- In the alto aria, the text *Von der Welt verlang ich nichts* (From the world desire I nothing), Bach repeats the word nothing (*nichts*) on several occasions to add emphasis to it. The light arrangement adds to this, with the alto sounding gently mocking of the world’s attractions.

- There is a remarkable break in the music, not seen elsewhere in the cantata, in mm. 29-30, right after the last use of the text *Von der Welt verlang ich nichts* (from the world desire I nothing), and just before the last uses of *Wenn ich nur den Himmel erbe* (if I but heaven inherit). The dramatic pause after “*nichts*” lends extra emphasis to what follows (*Wenn ich...*), which has a beautifully simple melodic line.
- The minor key and chromatic harmony of the final chorale, particularly the final three measures, seems a strange way to end the cantata. It strikes me as a bittersweet farewell given to the *Stolz und Pracht* (pride and pomp) of the world.

Questions

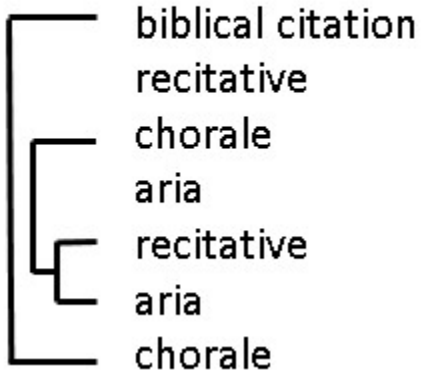
How did Bach select his hymns for his cantatas? Bach must have known the entire set of Lutheran hymns available, so naturally he would have selected those hymns whose words were in keeping with the libretto (here, of Johann Knauer). But I suspect he also selected on a musical basis, as in particular the chromatic ending of the third chorale to highlight the aggressive farewell to the world. One might guess that the specific hymn text may have inspired him in this direction.

How would Bach have selected the voice – soprano, alto, tenor, bass – for singing a particular recitative or aria? For BWV 64 the tenor is not used at all, and the two arias are sung by soprano and alto. I think this was done to give the cantata a lighter feeling, with the cantabile singing of both soprano and alto. The bass gets only a single recitative. But that recitative has by far the most words to be sung over any other movement. I think Bach wanted the bass’s deeper tone to offset the upper voices, for balance in the cantata,

as well as to express the melancholy of the text, with its concern that one must continue to tarry in this world.

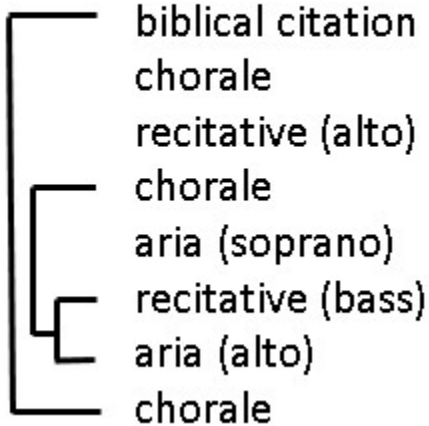
Is the soprano aria the structural central point of the cantata? According to Alfred Dürr, one of three primary structural types was used for the first Leipzig *Jahrgang*. The type used for BWV 64, as well as BWV 48, 40, 153, 65 and 67, looks like this:

Structural type, per Alfred Dürr¹²



The intention of the diagram is to show the centrality of the first aria, surrounded by a chorale and a recitative/aria pair. BWV 64 adds a third chorale to this, after the biblical citation, so giving it this structure:

Structure of BWV 64



The added chorale does not displace the middle aria from its centrality.

As has been noted above, the soprano aria is one of the two longest movements of the cantata. Its text is a most personal, heartfelt expression: What the world in itself contains, must pass away (*vergehen*) like smoke. But what Jesus gives me and what my soul loves, remains firm (*fest*) and eternally standing (*stehen*). Stephen Daw wrote of the central arias, “The centrally-placed arias almost always represent personal response to doctrine and challenge: they are less declamatory and dogmatic than the opening movements, less affirmative and structurally rigid, more personal and emotively responsive.”¹³ For this reason, and given its beauty, I think it well deserves its central place.

Notes

1. Wikipedia entry on BWV 64,
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sehet,_welch_eine_Liebe_hat_uns_der_Vater_erzeiget,_
_BWV_64](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sehet,_welch_eine_Liebe_hat_uns_der_Vater_erzeiget,_BWV_64)
2. Julian Mincham, “The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach”, Chapter 31 (BWV 40):
<http://www.jsbachcantatas.com/documents/chapter-31-bwv-40.htm>
3. Wikipedia entry on BWV 64 (see note 1)
4. Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach: With their Librettos in German-English Parallel Text*, p. 123
5. Julian Mincham, “The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach”, Chapter 32 (BWV 64):
<http://www.jsbachcantatas.com/documents/chapter-32-bwv-64.htm>
6. Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, p. 273
7. Mincham, Chapter 32 (BWV 64) (see note 5)
8. *Neue Bach Ausgabe* Vol. V, p. 113.
9. Wolff (see note 6), p. 264
10. Mincham, Chapter 32 (BWV 64) (see note 5)
11. Textual translations come from Melvin Unger, *Handbook to Bach’s Sacred Cantata Texts*, pp. 216 to 219
12. Stephen Daw, *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach, the Choral Works*, p. 78
13. Daw (see note 12), p. 79

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- Wolff, Christoph. *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.

Recordings

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggIMi9pW2ZU> (Concentus musicus Wien – Nikolaus Harnoncourt)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIP9brOQI9I> (Stuttgart Bach Collegium – Helmuth Rilling, starting at 49:12)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTYNH9owu2I> (Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, Ton Koopman)