

## Johann Sebastian Bach: *Christum wir sollen loben schon* – BWV 121

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Michael Praetorius  
Arranger of Luther's chorale

By Kim Patrick Clow – May 9, 2009

What a singularly turgid piece of music for the Christmas season! This is one of those instances where I would love to have been in St. Thomas on December 26, 1724, and to have seen the faces in the congregation as they heard the opening chorale that opens this cantata. No ordinary setting of the chorale, this was a polyphonic tour-de-force! The tune was a very familiar one: "*Christum wir sollen loben schon*," the melody dates back to the fifth century Christianity and was modified by Martin Luther into a congregational chorale published in Erfurt, Germany in 1524 (*Eyn Enchiridion*). This chorale was arranged many times, the most famous setting by Michael Praetorius (you can hear this setting in an MP3 provided for you at the end of this cantata introduction).

### The Chorale's Ancient History:



Early chant notation

According to the Emmanuel Music commentary on this chorale: "Our cantata BWV 121 is based upon the Luther chorale "*Christum wir sollen loben schon*." Here again is another Luther work treated in the respectful archaic manner. Luther took the early Christian hymn 'A solis ortus cardine' written by Caelius Sedulius no doubt for its connection to the early church and the idea of congregational singing. According to Groves': "Sedulius [Caelius Sedulius] was a Christian Latin poet. He is known principally for his '*Carmen paschale*,' a biblical epic in five books of dactylic hexameter, probably written in the period 425-450. It was well known by the end of

the 5th century and remained popular until at least the 12th; it was frequently copied and quoted, and was the source for the text of the intonation of the Votive Mass of the Virgin, *Salve, 'sancta parens,*' and the Christmas antiphon '*Genuit puerpera regem.*'

Two shorter poems are also attributed to Sedulius: a text on salvation history, ‘*Cantemus socii Domini*’ (variously designated ‘hymnus’, ‘versus’ and ‘carmen’ in the manuscripts), and the famous abecedarian iambic hymn ‘*A solis ortus cardine*,’ which recounts the life of Christ from the Incarnation to the Ascension and is found in liturgical manuscripts from the 10th century onwards. The latter text was often divided into sections for different liturgical occasions: the first seven strophes were used for Christmas, the next four (beginning ‘*Hostis Herodes impie*’) for Epiphany, and the following four (beginning ‘*Katerva matrum personat*’) for the Feast of the Holy Innocents. Both ‘*A solis ortus cardine*’ and the ‘*Carmen paschale*’ had a significant influence on medieval poets.”

## Martin Luther: Hymn composer



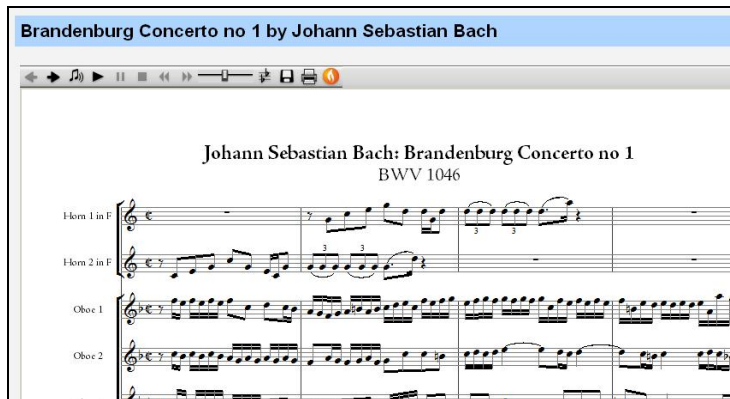
*Martinus Luther*



Original edition of Martin Luther's hymn book  
"A mighty fortress is our God" is seen here

Part of Martin Luther's Reformation included the addition (or I should say the restoring) of congregational participation in the liturgy. Towards that end, Luther wrote hymns and the first collection of these was published in Erfurt in 1524. According to Emmanuel Music, "As with other Luther arrangements of Latin sources, the melody is very irregular in form, four phrases of irregular length. The second and third phrases are similar and have only one (but an important one) note difference, at the beginning. The last phrase also has similarities to the 2nd and third phrases. Perhaps the most interesting characteristic of the melody is that each phrase is longer than the last so that by the end the last phrase is almost twice as long as the first. There is another melodic peculiarity. The 2nd degree of the scale (the tune is in the Phrygian mode) is sometimes sharpened and sometimes not. This ambiguity, which is different in every version of the chorale, gives rise to interesting harmonic variants. Bach uses it both as tone painting, as in the 2nd phrase which refers to the "pure maiden." [#1 chorale bar 37-47 with text] and allows the resultant harmony to lead the music in a different direction [#1 bar 48-59 bottom three voices on one stave, no text]. Bach was always interested in this melody. His setting from the "Orgelbüchlein" while only three lines long, is one of the greatest pieces in the set. This setting encapsulated Bach's feelings about the chorale. The fifth bar is typical of the harmonic ambiguity that results from the altered second tone of the scale [fifth bar in BWV 611]. It is interesting that Bach's feelings remained basically unchanged about this melody."

## Multimedia Files: Sibelius & MP3s



Screenshot of Scorch file of Brandenburg Concerto no 1

successful installation, you should see and hear a sample file provided on the Scorch page. Also make sure you have your computer speakers on, or your earphones plugged in.

### Scorch Browser plug-in:

<http://www.Sibelius.com/Scorch>

### Martin Luther's version of "Christum wir sollen loben schon":

<http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Scores/BWV121-Kim/Chorale-Sibelius/chorale-tune.htm>

### "Christum wir sollen loben schon," BWV 121:

<http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Scores/BWV121-Kim/BWV121-Sibelius/bwv121.htm>

### MP3 files:

[Martin Luther's Hymn as MIDI file](#)

[John Eliot Gardner's performance of the opening chorus to BWV 121](#)

A beautiful performance of the opening chorus.

[Comparison MP3:](#)

Michael Praetorius setting of the hymn performed by Paul McCreech with the Gabrieli Consort & Players.

