

Bach Cantata, *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*, BWV 1.

25th March, 1725. Festo annunciationis Mariae. Bc. A173.

Dürr ii/546. Whittaker ii/104.

BG 1 p. 1. NBA 28.2 p 1. CC 11 p. 435. Eulenburg 1012.

Werner	Richter	Harnoncourt	Rotzsch	Rilling	Suzuki	Koopman	Leusink	Gardiner	King
1965 I/4	1968 II/2	1971	1983	1980	2005 34		IV/11	2000 21	

The numbering of the Bach cantatas follows that given in Schmieder's *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis* [Catalogue of Bach's Works] first published in 1950.¹ In turn, Schmieder followed the sequence established by the *Bach Gesellschaft Gesamtausgabe*, the monumental edition of Bach's music, published in 47 volumes between 1850 and 1899. The impetus for this remarkable scholarly enterprise stemmed from the increasing awareness throughout the early nineteenth century of Bach's exceptional cultural significance. A major milestone in this journey was Mendelssohn's performance of the St Matthew Passion in 1829. The editors of the Bach Gesellschaft had intended to commence publication with the *B Minor Mass*, but, because there were difficulties in accessing the holograph materials, they started instead with a volume of ten cantatas. The sequence in which the cantatas were presented was to a large extent random, though clearly the editors aimed to impress their original subscribers with a particularly resplendent opening selection. A small group of cantatas had previously been published c.1830 by Simrock of Bonn, under the editorship of A.B. Marx; this group was retained intact in the *Bach Gesellschaft* edition, forming the sequence BWV 101-106. Occasionally, other patterns can be discerned – for example, volume XII includes a series of cantatas for solo voice (BWV 51-56)² and a duet cantata (BWV 57). But, in general, the BWV number conveys no liturgical, stylistic or chronological significance.

Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern, BWV 1, was composed to celebrate the festival of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 25th March 1725, which, in that year, coincided with Palm Sunday. Bach and his librettist drew together theological and musical images appropriate to both festivals, and, by basing the work on a chorale more usually associated with Advent, emphasised the sense of anticipation and the hopefulness of a new beginning.³ For reasons not fully known, this work proved to be the last Chorale Cantata of the remarkable series begun on Trinity Sunday, 1724.⁴ In these cantatas, the text of a well-known chorale (hymn) was adapted to form the cantata libretto. Usually (as here), the first and last verses were retained together with their associated melody as the bases of the opening chorus and concluding chorale respectively; the middle verses were paraphrased to supply the text for the recitatives and arias.

¹ Schmieder, Wolfgang, *Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis der musikalischen Werke von Johann Sebastian Bach*, [known as *Bach Werke Verzeichnis*] Leipzig: Brietkopf und Härtel, 1950.

² *Schlage doch, gewünschte Stunde* was included in the *Bach Gesellschaft* edition as BWV 53, though it was later shown to have been composed by Georg Melchior Hoffmann.

³ For further discussion of these interconnections, see Chafe, Eric, *Analyzing Bach Cantatas*, New York: OUP, 2000, p. 262 note 12.

⁴ There is strong circumstantial evidence that the librettist was Andreas Stübel, formerly Co-Rector of St Thomas School. His death in January 1725 would have deprived Bach of suitably adapted, chorale-based texts. See Hans-Joachim Schulze, "Texte und Textdichter" in ed. Christoph Wolff, *Die Welt der Bach Kantaten 3*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1999, p. 116.

Philipp Nicolai's hymn, "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern", was first published in 1599; the tune itself may be older in origin. The poetic images of Christ as the guiding star and as the heavenly bridegroom for whom the soul yearns were both well-known in the Lutheran tradition. For the two recitatives and arias, the cantata librettist has skilfully interwoven elements of the chorale text with parallels drawn from the set readings for the day – Isaiah's prophecy of the coming of Christ and Gabriel's announcement to Mary. For example, in the first recitative, the cantata librettist has combined the image of the 'high-born King', taken from the second stanza of the chorale text, with Gabriel's message, as recounted in St Luke's Gospel. Thus the cantata libretto ingeniously combines a hymn of praise appropriate to Palm Sunday (Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem) with references to the Annunciation (foretelling Christ's birth).

Bach incorporated this celebrated chorale into several works (see cantatas BWV 36, 37, 49, 61 and 172) though frequently in more ornate versions. For the opening chorus of this cantata, Bach reverted to the 'pure' form of the melody, but set it in 12/8 time, giving a joyful, dance-like feel. The chorale is unusual in that its ten lines are of widely varying lengths (from one bar to three-and-a-half) and tonally rather static in F major. If Bach considered these aspects to be restrictive, he responded by creating a sublime opening chorus from just two elemental one-bar ideas. The opening motif is a précis of the first line of the chorale, clearly seen by comparing the bass version of the motif (from bar 14) with the chorale line (Example 1); initially, this is very lightly scored for just solo violin and continuo. By contrast, the second bar comprises a richly embellished chord of F major, combining triumphant arpeggio patterns in the wind instruments (two horns and two oboes da caccia) with glittering semiquaver figuration on the two solo violins. The subsequent roles of these contrasting ideas are quite strongly demarcated: from the opening motif is developed most of the material for the lower three voices; the embellished chord, on the other hand, is essentially reserved for the instrumental forces.

Example 1. Derivation of BWV 1/i, first motif, from chorale tune.

Wie schön leuch - tet der Mor - gen - stern,
Wie schön leuch - tet der Mor - gen - stern,

Determining an appropriate tempo for the opening chorus poses a special challenge. 12/8 is a particularly distinctive metre: it underpins some of Bach's noblest choruses and is generally treated as indicating a rather broad tempo. Commentators tend to characterise this movement as a 'magnificent processional', invoking such adjectives as 'stately, leisurely',⁵ 'dignified' and 'ceremonial'.⁶ Two disparate dance traditions

⁵ Whittaker, W. Gillies, *The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach*, London: OUP, 1959, vol. II p 104. Whittaker wrote the first comprehensive survey of Bach's cantatas in English; his comments are well worth studying, although it is advisable to be highly circumspect regarding the historical context: the dates of the cantatas suggested by Whittaker are now considered quite inaccurate.

inform Baroque movements in compound tempi: the slower Siciliano and the contrastingly livelier Gigue. In instrumental repertoires the differences can be quite striking: the slow movement of Vivaldi's Op 3/11, a Siciliano, bears the tempo indication 'Largo e Spiccato', whereas the last movement of Op 3/2, a Gigue, is 'Allegro'. The motifs of Bach's chorus lie more in the tradition of the Gigue than of the Siciliano (which characteristically incorporates distinctive dotted rhythms). The measured pace of the harmonies also hints at a brisk pulse: it is quite varied, frequently moving in minims, with some chords extending to a bar or more (bar 2, bars 4–5 etc). Of course, at a faster tempo, the semiquaver figuration – almost entirely confined to the concertante violins – becomes quite virtuosic, but, throughout, it is beautifully accommodated to the instrument, with plentiful open string sonorities to ease the technical burden and to brighten the overall effect.

A further interpretative question concerns the ornamentation of the opening motif. It is clear from the oboe II/tenor doublings in bars 14–15 that (in this context) both mordent and trill represent notationally distinct versions of a similar underlying decorative pattern (Example 2). In both cases, the parallel melodic line in the vocal part is rendered in *continuous* quavers. For the instrumental line to duplicate this, the trill must begin on a quaver-long upper appoggiatura, perhaps as illustrated in the upper stave of Example 1. Whether the same ornamentation should be adopted by the horns when using modern instruments (bar 8 etc) is also open to question. Occasionally the interpretation of the appoggiatura presents problems: in bar 98, for example, continuing a rather dissonant sequence, the second solo violin plays C–B against B in the ripieno violins.

Example 2. Comparison of vocal and instrumental lines b. 14.

Possible interpretation of oboe ornaments.

Oboe di caccia

Tenor

Wie schön leuch-tet der Mor-gen- stern, der Mor-gen- stern, wie schön leuch-tet

The opening chorus melds three distinct formal principles: *ritornello* construction, derived from the high-baroque concerto, *cantus firmus* technique, more usually associated with mass and motet settings from the Renaissance, and *Barform*, the characteristic shape of the chorale tune. Bach studied ritornello form in the music of his Italian contemporaries – especially Vivaldi. Characteristically, in a concerto of the Baroque period, there is a distinctive textural contrast between the ritornello (“returning”) theme played by the full ensemble (*tutti*) and the solo episodes, which are usually more lightly scored. Conceptually, in the chorale cantata, this solo-tutti

⁶ Gardiner, John Eliot, notes for CD SDG 118, p 15.

textural antithesis has been replaced by a tonal contrast between the purely instrumental passages and the accompanied chorale phrases, in which the chorale melody is retained as a *cantus firmus* (“fixed song”) in the soprano part. The chorale tune itself is cast in *Barform*: the first three melodic lines⁷, known as the *Stollen*, are repeated; the remaining four lines form the *Abgesang*. This AAB structure is reflected in the overall shape of the opening chorus: bars 1–37 are repeated as bars 38–74; bars 75–119 include the *Abgesang*.

The chorus begins and ends with a radiant twelve-bar instrumental ritornello, which also appears in full from bar 38. Apart from these full statements, the ritornello theme appears abbreviated and sometimes developed between the lines of the chorale. For example, after the second chorale line (bars 20–29), Bach restates the material from bars 5–8. The soprano⁸ sings each chorale phrase in long notes as a *cantus firmus*, doubled by the first horn. Below this, the lower voices interweave contrapuntal phrases based on the opening motif. The lower voices are reinforced by oboes and ripieno strings, while the solo violins continue their glittering semiquaver figuration. The second vocal episode (from bar 20) begins in the lower voices, developing the same motif, but this time also incorporating the chorale tune in diminution (shorter note values – dotted crotchets in tenor, bar 20, and alto, bar 22). This type of anticipation of the main theme is known as “pre-imitation”. The third chorale phrase, with its six-note descending scale, elicits a very characteristic Baroque compositional response: an extended sequence of suspensions, seen most clearly in the second horn, bar 34. The whole opening section is now reviewed to allow the *Stollen* of the chorale to be repeated with its new text. However, Bach’s setting incorporates numerous changes of detail: for example, the opening motif is now on the horn (bar 38) and the violins move up an octave (bar 41).

The setting of the *Abgesang* – the second part of the chorale – is interspersed with modulating and sometimes quite dissonant ritornello material, initially scored for just the string ensemble; the first leads, via a circle of fifths (bb 75–78), towards D minor. The single-bar chorale lines (bars 84 and 86) resonate to the decorated chord from bar 2. Bar 86 incorporates a particularly affective harmonic shift from C major to A major, leading again to D minor for the tenth line of the chorale. The subsequent ritornello is quite distinctive: the imitative phrases passed between the two violins outline an unusual real sequence, which modulates from F major (bar 96), through G major (bar 98) to A major (bar 100). The finale chorale line – a scale descending through a full octave – is, like the close of the *Stollen*, harmonised with an extended sequence of suspensions, this time imparting an emphatically resounding sense of fulfilment.

Both recitatives are *secco* (just continuo-accompanied), and, though compact, are full of expressive nuance. The first, for tenor, is purely syllabic, with declamatory repetition on “Süssigkeit” [sweetness] and, as Whittaker points out, a striking false relation in the penultimate bar.⁹ The second, for bass, incorporates brief melismas on “Freudenschein” [joyful glow] and “Erquickung” [comfort].

⁷ In a chorale tune, the end of each melodic line is traditionally demarcated with a pause (fermata) sign.

⁸ I have used soprano in the singular here, though how many singers Bach allocated to each line is the subject of much scholarly debate; theories range from one singer to three or four per part.

⁹ Whittaker, op. cit., Vol 2 pp. 107–8.

The two arias maintain the joyful, dance-like quality engendered by the opening chorus, a feeling underscored by a transparency and lightness in the accompanying lines: pizzicato cello in the soprano aria, and staccato (emphasised both with the word and dots) for the ripieno strings in the tenor aria. The first aria combines the soprano voice with an obbligato accompaniment on the oboe da caccia, the semiquaver figuration of which represents the “heavenly, Godly flames”. Rather unusually the original performance material includes two copies of the part for oboe solo, one notated in the alto clef and the other notated as a transposing part in the treble clef, though it seems highly unlikely that Bach required two players to perform this single line. The aria is constructed in ‘modified da capo form’ (A B A’) in which the first section (A) modulates to the dominant and the middle section (B) develops the material from A, starting and ending in the relative minor. Section A is then restated, but modified to end on the tonic; the point of modification falls relatively late in the process (compare bar 72 with bar 22).

The virtuosic tenor aria poses some interesting questions. It is intriguing to speculate how the original subscribers to the Bach Gesellschaft edition responded to this first offering, containing music so very different from the aesthetic prevailing in the mid-nineteenth century. One imagines a sense of awe, but also bewilderment, particularly at the extraordinarily challenging writing for solo voice. The tenor aria is, as it happens, one of the most technically demanding from Bach’s pen, with its semiquaver runs, arpeggiated patterns, delicate trills, repeated notes and sustained high tessitura. Bach was criticised in his own day for expecting his vocalists to perform with instrument-like agility.¹⁰ This view may have seemed even more apposite to the mind of the mid-romantic musician.

Several scholars have speculated whether this movement has been adapted from a now-lost secular original.¹¹ Certainly, the minuet style would not be out of place in a secular cantata, nor, indeed, in a concerto movement. As in the opening chorus, and appropriately for this hymn of praise performed on “Voice and with the resonance of strings”, the string ensemble is enriched by two solo violins. Bach explores the textural possibilities of this concerto-like string group to the full. Sometimes the solo violins combine in unison with the first ripieno violin; sometimes they join in “folk-like” thirds; occasionally they exchange imitative phrases; most intriguingly, they often play the “semi-quaver-pair motif” against a simplified, staccato version of their own line. These subtle instrumental colourings are counterpoised with varied playful rhythms within the 3/8 metre.

One slightly puzzling moment, b 146, comprises a descending semiquaver scale in the first solo violin, the final two semiquavers of which produce consecutive fifths against the tenor line. Perhaps, at an appropriate tempo such parallels are unnoticeable, but if the last two semiquavers in the violin part were B flat–A, this would, first, maintain the pattern in sixths with the solo voice, and secondly, establish the sequence to be

¹⁰ J. A. Scheibe wrote, “He demands that singers and instrumentalists should be able to do with their throats and instruments whatever he can play on the clavier. But this is impossible.” *The New Bach Reader* p. 338.

¹¹ Whittaker, *op. cit.*, p 109, cites the trill on “und”; Arnold Schering, preface to Eulenburg score No. 1012, Berlin: Eulenburg, 1928, p iv, discusses the underlay in bb. 60 – 61; the missing “zu” of “zubereiten” in bar 38 might also be noted.

used in bars 148 and 150. The original and possible “corrected” reading are shown in Example 3.

Example 3. Possible “correct reading” of bar 146?

possible violin line?

146 147 148 149

VI. conc.
I

Tenor

le - bens - lang mit ge - sang,

The closing chorale is a homophonic setting of the tune, with the instruments doubling the voices. Bach has enriched this ensemble with a vigorous counterpoint played by the second horn.

Recordings

There are several fine recordings of this cantata. The radiant appeal of all the movements lends itself to a wide range of interpretative styles. Helmut Rilling’s 1980 account benefits from the polished technical standard his team achieved in both performance and recording. There is a particularly glowing interpretation of the opening chorus and concluding chorale by the King’s Consort (Hyperion, King5). Elly Ameling recorded a superb interpretation of the soprano aria for a CD devoted to Bach’s arias with oboe obbligato (EMI), and it is to be regretted that such a great singer was not more closely involved with one of the major cantata series. The recitatives, which are sometimes over-interpreted, are particularly effective under Nicolaus Harnoncourt’s direction. For a complete performance, which is consistently fine, with a well-paced opening chorus plus the considerable benefit of Peter Schreier in his prime for the tenor aria, Hans-Joachim Rotzsch’s account is much to be recommended (Berlin Classics). As ever, for an overall high level of technical polish, the 2005 recording by Suzuki is a secure choice (BIS).

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