J.S. Bach - Church Cantatas BWV 109

J.S. Bach
Cantata No. 109
Ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Unglauben

Form: Chorus - Recit (T) - Aria (T) - Recit (A) - Aria (A) - Chorale. The symmetrical structure contrasts doubt/fear with faith/hope.

1. Chorus (belief vs. doubt)
4. A. Recit. (encouragement to trust)
2. T. Recit. (vocation)
5. A. Aria (Christ helps faith)
3. T. Aria (faith almost gone)
6. Chorale (faith never put to shame)

For Bach’s first annual cantata cycle in Leipzig, Bach often revised previous works (23 of about 60 cantatas). This one is new. See Johann Sebastian Bach: The Sacred Vocal Music Complete Edition: Cantatas (Stuttgart: Carus Verlag, 2017), vol. 10, p. 234 (Owen Hiemke, translated by David Kosinier).

The day’s Gospel describes an encounter between Jesus and a nobleman whose son is sick. In the account, Jesus says, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” The cantata’s libretto focuses on doubt vs. faith, beginning with the words from another Gospel account in which a man vacillates between doubt and faith when asking Jesus to heal his son. The following movements contrast doubt and faith, similar to the dialogue between fear and hope in BWV 60.
The vocal theme for the first text phrase begins with a sustained note (for “believe”) but then vacillates.

Alfred Dürr writes, “The opening movement is strikingly loose in construction and contains marked concertante elements both in the orchestral and the choral parts. Noteworthy is the thematic independence between the vocal and the instrumental parts. The extended introductory ritornello for the orchestra alternates between tuttis and solo passages in which oboe I and solo violin I play concertante duets. The ritornello is developed out of a motive later heard repeatedly on the instruments during the vocal passages. Despite its speech-like gesture, this motive proves to be unsuited to the vocal text and is therefore substantially remodelled to form the opening theme of the vocal section.” See *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, translated by Richard Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 599–600.

The 3 lower voices respond, then the soprano sings both phrases, to which the other 3 voices respond in counterpoint. Similar sections occur later with the other voices serving as leaders. Alfred Dürr notes the “frequent alternation between a single part, a duet and full four-part choral passages against independent orchestral parts, which dominate in choral-insertion passages and elsewhere recede behind the vocal parts in an accompanying role. In addition, Stimmtausch (exchange of parts) plays an important role in the construction of this movement. All these factors may be accorded either a text-interpretative significance (reflecting the alternation between belief and doubt), or else a constructive purpose, reflecting the extreme brevity of the sung text. See *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, translated by Richard Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 600.
The coro often reinforces the soprano's cry for help. See full score.
The alto sings the first text phrase (an approximate echo of Vln I). The 3 lower voices respond, then the leading voice sings both phrases, to which the other 3 voices respond in counterpoint.
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Ich glaube, lieber Herr,
Herr, ich glaube, lieber Herr, lieber
Ich glaube, lieber Herr,
Herr, ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Un.

E major, A minor, A minor, G7, C major

Herr, ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Un.

Oboes & strings tutti punctuate.

C major, E7, A minor
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The bass sings both text phrases in an interplay with the instruments, then the tenor sings the theme of the first text phrase. After a tutti response, the T & B sing the first phrase in dialogue, after which S & A respond with the second phrase, then all voices sing the second text phrase at length in counterpoint. The loose/unpredictable structure suggests unbidden vacillation between doubt and faith.
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Herr, hilf meinem Glauben, hilf meinen Unglauben!

The lines get longer and the harmonies more intense...
2. **Recitativo** • Hope vs. Fear: vacillation between the two (109/2). The struggle between doubt and faith is personalized in two movements sung by the tenor.

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Three statements of God’s willingness to help (marked forte) are separated with three statements of doubt (beginning with the words “ah, no” and marked piano). Such dynamics in Bach’s vocal parts are rare. The contrast is stressed also in the harmonic writing (triadic vs. chromatic harmonies).

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The reference to God’s hand not being shortened is an allusion to such biblical passages as Isaiah 59:1 (see note).

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Eric Chafe notes that the movement is tonally unstable, with phrases having positive sentiments move sharpward, ones with negative sentiments move flatward. See note.

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The 2nd and 3rd statements of “ah, no” are more hopeful, with ascending leaps of a 6th, foreshadowing the subsequent cry of “ah, Lord.”

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The arioso alludes to several psalms such as Psalm 6:3. The inflection matching the question.

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Word painting: “Lange” (“long”) is extended with a graphic melisma as an arioso, marked forte and adagio.
Dürer writes, “The third movement, fully scored for strings but with the first violin predominant, uses marked rhythms and wide intervals to characterize the wavering between fear and hope of the text. In addition, the frequent alternation between string and continuo accompaniment in the vocal passages may have a programmatic purpose as a depiction of mood changes.” See The Cantatas of J. S. Bach, tran. by Richard Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 600.

109/3. **3. Aria**

The jagged, jerking lines suggest great agitation on the part of the believer regarding his condition and are reminiscent of the tenor aria “Ach, mein Sinn” in the St. John Passion (Peter’s remorse after denying Jesus).
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Herz!

Wie zwei felhaftig ist mein Hoffen!

mein geängstigt Herz!

Hoffen, wie wankt mein geängstigt Herz, wie zwei...
Stephen Crist observes that "the unusually adventurous harmonic structure of the B section embodies the polarity between belief and unbelief (D minor at bar 32 and F# minor at bar 39 are equally remote in opposite directions from the tonic, E minor). The abrupt turn away from the dominant (B minor) towards A minor just before the da capo is also..."
Text painting: The reference to fear creating constantly new agony is underscored by a sustained note on "Schmerz" accompanied by the jerking rhythm in Vln 1 and punctuated by the lower strings, leading to a suspenseful pause.

Des Glau.bens_ Doch glimmt kaum her_...
4. Recitativo

The fourth movement begins the "belief" part of the cantata. The alto, who sings both nos. 4 & 5, is often the voice of the believing soul. See Petzoldt, Bach Kommentar 1:592. Faith in the promise that Jesus will act (109/4).

"Belief" Section of the cantatbegins. 109/4.

The references to "Jesus still doing wonders" and "seeing salvation from afar with eyes of faith" allude to the Gospel reading (John 4:48, 50): Jesus therefore said to [the man] "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe...Go, your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went his way.
The dance-like rhythm vacillates between implied duplre and triple meter, reflecting the struggle between doubt and faith (cf. BWV 182/6). Note: Martin Pettold and Sven Hiekmke call the movement a minuet, Alfred Dürer calls it a sarabande, while Natalie and Jenne do not list the movement as a dance. See note for references.

5. Aria  •Christ helps his own in the battle between doubt & faith (109/5). Parallel 3rds & 6ths in the oboes suggest the sweetness of the Savior’s presence referenced in the text.

Da capo aria 1  Ob I, II

Lombard rhythm

Ritornello derived from vocal line.

F major

Periodic phrase structure similar to that of a dance.

G7  C major  C major  C7  F major

hemiola

Descending run shared by Ob I & Ob II suggests both hope lying helpless and God’s sovereign help as referenced in the text.

F major  F7  B-flat major  C7  F major

The text alludes to biblical passages such as John 10 and 2 Timothy 2 (see side note).

Alto

Der Heiland kennet ja die

F major  F major

Text painting: Low vocal lines ending with sustained note for “hope lying helpless.”

F major  G7  C major  C major
Repeats descending runs the by oboes suggest both hope lying forlorn and God’s sovereign help, as referenced in the text.
Wenn Fleisch und Geist in ihnen streiten, so steht er ihnen selbst zur Seite, damit er letzter Gläubiger besiegt!

The struggle between Spirit and flesh (referenced in the text) alludes to biblical passages such as the that of the opening chorus (Mark 9:24, Mark 14:38, and Galations 5:17. See side note.

Text painting: Sustained note for "[faith] triumphs." Martin Petzoldt notes that the parallelism with "hope lying helpless (mn. 24, 44, 52) appears nonsensical at first until one considers that faith involves first the emptying of all self-reliance. See "Bach Kommentar" 1:593.

Word painting: Energetic melisma for "fight/ contend."
Wenn Fleisch und Geist in ihnen sich streiten, so
steht er ihnen selbst zur Seite, damit zuletzt der Glaube
siegt; wenn Fleisch und Geist in ihnen sich streiten.
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Seiten, damit zuletzt der Glaube siegt,

Text painting: Sustained note for "faith triumphs."

Adagio
Text painting: Adagio for the calm after faith has triumphed over doubt.
The chorale is embedded in an animated orchestral fabric that also provides articulating episodes. The oboes and strings lead in alternate concertante fashion, climaxing together before entries of the cantus firmus. The soprano introduces each chorale phrase, then is joined by the other voices in animated homophony.

It is possible that Bach began thinking about writing a chorale cantata cycle around this time (October/November 1723).

Whoever trusts in God shall never be put to shame (109/6). This is the 7th of 9 stanzas in the 1524 hymn by Lazarus Spengler (1479–1534).

For the significance of D minor, see note at no. 1. Quasi-ostinato bass, perhaps representing the “Felsen” (rock) on which belief is built, as referenced in the text. The frenetic orchestral texture probably represents the storm of Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:24–25 to which the chorale text alludes: “Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall.”

The constantly descending lines (including chromatic long notes) appear to relate to the misfortunes that have fallen on the believer, as referenced in the text.
In a later version, Bach doubled the cantus firmus with a corno da caccia.

Link to foregoing emphasis of hope is trust ("Vertrauen").

The reference to "building on a rock" alludes to biblical passages such as Matthew 7:24 [Christ]: "Every one... who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock" and 1 Peter 2:6: "It stands in scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame.'" (See also Isaiah 28:16, Romans 9:33, Ephesians 2:20.)
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der wird nicht immer
ob ihm gleich geht

der wird nicht immer zu
ob ihm gleich geht zu

der wird nicht immer
ob ihm gleich geht

der wird nicht immer zu
ob ihm gleich geht zu

zu Schan den:
zu Schan den, zu Schan den:
zu Schan den:
zu Schan den:

Chromaticism for "never be put to shame."

Ob 1
Ob 2

A7
D minor
A minor

A7

Oboes & Strings
Strings

Oboes

B7
A minor

A major
A7
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ich doch nie

__ hab' ich doch nie

hie, hab' ich doch nie

hie, hab' ich doch nie

den Menschen

den Menschen

den Menschen

den Menschen

sehen fallen,

sehen fallen,

sehen fallen,

sehen fallen,

sehen fallen,

sehen fallen,
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Ob 1

\[G(7)\]  \[F7\]  \[B\text{-}flat\text{ major}\]  \[(C7)\]

\[A_{7}\]  \[D\text{ minor}\]

\[B\]

der sich

der sich

der sich

der sich

\[D\text{ minor}\]  \[D7\]  \[G\text{ major}\]

\[G(7)\]

läuft auf Got
tes

läuft auf Got
tes

läßt, der sich ver
läßt auf Got
tes

läßt, der sich ver
läßt auf Got
tes

Strings

\[E7\]  \[A\text{ minor}\]  \[B7\]
Martin Petzold suggests that the modulation from D minor to A major during the last chorale phrase emphasizes the hope that can come from God alone by faith. See Bach Kommentar 1:593.

Bach could have returned to D minor for the final ritornello but he continues in A minor (see above note).