

HYMN PERFORMANCE

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Playing the Hymns Bach Knew

The year 2000 is the 250th anniversary of Johann Sebastian Bach's death. When Bach died in 1750, he left a legacy which summarized his art and life's work: he brought Baroque Era musical forms to their

peak of development. Many current commemorations reflect his prodigious writing for solo and ensemble instruments, motets, and cantatas. Happily, contemporary hymnals also share a great legacy from Bach. For example, the *Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990) includes 19 Bach harmonizations and one tune attributed to him: *Ich halte Treulich still*.

The name "Bach" means "brook," but became synonymous with "musician" because of the stream of

Ich halte Treulich still

Johann Sebastian Bach; 1736

The first system of musical notation for 'Ich halte Treulich still' consists of two staves, a treble clef on top and a bass clef on the bottom. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is common time (C). The melody in the treble clef begins with a quarter note G4, followed by eighth notes A4-B4, quarter notes C5-B4, and quarter notes A4-G4. The bass line starts with a quarter note G3, followed by quarter notes A3-B3, quarter notes C4-B3, and quarter notes A3-G3. The system concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

The second system of musical notation continues the piece. The treble clef melody features a quarter note G4, quarter notes A4-B4, quarter notes C5-B4, and quarter notes A4-G4. The bass line continues with quarter notes G3-A3, quarter notes B3-C4, quarter notes D4-C4, and quarter notes B3-A3. The system ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

The third system of musical notation continues the piece. The treble clef melody features a quarter note G4, quarter notes A4-B4, quarter notes C5-B4, and quarter notes A4-G4. The bass line continues with quarter notes G3-A3, quarter notes B3-C4, quarter notes D4-C4, and quarter notes B3-A3. The system ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

The fourth and final system of musical notation concludes the piece. The treble clef melody features a quarter note G4, quarter notes A4-B4, quarter notes C5-B4, and quarter notes A4-G4. The bass line continues with quarter notes G3-A3, quarter notes B3-C4, quarter notes D4-C4, and quarter notes B3-A3. The system ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

musicians from that family. The heart of the Bachs' music-making was service to the church and to the court. Family members practiced their craft with the highest standards in composing and performing music that is melodious, yet constructed to reflect the "perfect order" of the universe. In the words of Baroque composer/theorist Johann Joseph Fux, "A composition meets the demands of good taste if it is well constructed, avoids trivialities as well as willful eccentricities, aims at the sublime, but moves in a natural, ordered way, combining brilliant ideas with perfect workmanship." Johann Sebastian Bach was the culmination of that ideal.

One only needs to spend time with the 371 Chorales of Bach to marvel at his genius. He stretched harmony into dissonance to portray pain, weakness, sin, and angst. He used rhythms and motifs to portray faith, temptation, wandering, compassion, and gentleness. We revere Bach for his tone painting; indeed, he seems to have enjoyed the challenge of taking the text and tunes of others and musically visualizing the content for singers and listeners. I often compare Bach's coloring through music to the magnificent tapestries and stained glass windows that adorn European churches and cathedrals. Biblical stories were taught and remembered through these pictorial art forms. Bach does much the same with his chorale harmonizations.

Bach set tunes that captured the meaning of the text and complimented word stresses; texts true to the theology of scripture; and melodies that sang well, even after countless repetitions. These criteria, which stand the test of time, are reasons why so many Bach harmonizations appear in current hymnals. We must also acknowledge the craft of translators who have sought to maintain the strong mutual ties of text and tune.

How are we to interpret these hymns? A little background about the instruments of Bach's day will help answer this question. Many instruments reached the peak of their development at the height of the Baroque Era; the organs of Arp Schnitger (north Germany) and Bach's close friend Gottfried Silbermann (Saxony, south Germany) were among the period's finest and are still regarded as such today. The Baroque Era favored the harpsichord, in which the strings are plucked and the player cannot vary the tone through touch. To play Bach's harmonizations requires good technique, thoughtful fingering, and consistent accuracy.

The organ builder Gottfried Silbermann, working with Bach, also contributed substantially to the development of the piano. King Frederick the Great is said to have owned no fewer than 14 Silbermann fortepianos in his Sans Souci palace at Potsdam, and it was ostensibly to try out such an instrument that Bach was invited to Potsdam in 1747. Bach often said that he preferred the softer clavichord, but that the harpsichord had the mastery and strength necessary for cer-

tain pieces. However, he preferred a stronger, less jangling type of harpsichord sound, for he worked hard during his lifetime to promote his own version of a "keyboard-lute" or "lautenclavicimbel," a keyboard instrument of plucked strings. The inventory of Bach's possessions at the time of his death reveals that he owned two lautenclavicimbel, three harpsichords, one lute and a spinet.


We can readily surmise that Bach's keen sense of timbre carried over to the organ. We read that his contemporaries praised his organ registrations for being creative.

In interpreting Bach's chorales, we must show a respect and affection for the music. Too many performances of Bach's music adopt a fast, almost racy tempo that would not have been considered or tolerated in the staid atmosphere of a Lutheran church service in 1730. If anything, tempi would have been slower and more deliberate than we would accept. If the tempo is too slow, the piece drags; if too fast, vital detail is lost as the musicians scramble to grapple with challenges to physical dexterity. "If Bach wrote it, the listener should hear it" is a good contrapuntal mantra.

Balance is vital so that everything can be heard. This means careful practice, attention to fingering and pedal technique, and careful concentration. Our ears and our sense of touch must be alert to the subtleties of Bach's counterpoint. A good performer will study the composition's architecture and reflect it in performance through changes in registration. Too often today, such considerations are dispensed with; indeed, one school of thought supports performance from start to finish on one manual with one selection of stops.

There is a spirit to every age, every composer, and every piece of music. In Baroque times, secular and sacred life were interrelated, and music was not only enjoyed, but also respected as a spiritual gift. More importantly, the spirit of the Baroque Era is characterized by clarity, for the music is contrapuntal, and every note in every line has its place.

Interpreting Bach chorales invites love and respect for the music, enjoyment in performance, and above all, clarity in the articulation and timbre balance—the essentials of Baroque music. Today many people are seeking music for the mind, music combining beauty with the order of an underlying architecture and structure. Bach's chorales fit those criteria perfectly.

When we are familiar with Bach's faith, his knowledge of the Bible, the craft of his composition, and his chorale settings that invariably sing so beautifully, we are inspired to say, "Thanks be to God for the gift of his life and work." 

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