

Bach Cantata *Was mein Gott will das g'scheh allzeit*, BWV 111

Bach's Cantata, *Was mein Gott will das g'scheh allzeit*, BWV 111, forms part of the cantata cycle of 1724 to 1725. This series is known as the Chorale Cantata *Jahrgang* [annual cycle], because the text of each work is based on a Lutheran chorale (hymn), and the opening chorus of each work incorporates the tune of the chorale. The cycle was probably intended to celebrate the bicentenary of the first Lutheran chorale tunes, published in 1524. The chorales were an immense source of inspiration to Bach – one of his first major cyclical projects had been *Das Orgelbüchlein*, a sequence of chorale preludes for organ corresponding to each Sunday and feastday throughout the ecclesiastical year. Neither *Das Orgelbüchlein* nor the Chorale Cantata *Jahrgang* was fully completed; Bach ceased composing chorale cantatas abruptly at Easter 1725, about two-thirds of the way through the cycle, though, in later years, he added further cantatas to the series.

The texts and melodies of the Lutheran hymns often originated independently, indeed, several of the tunes predate the Reformation; some were derived from secular tunes, others were adapted from Gregorian plainsong, and, in distant origin, these might even be traced further back to early Judaic chant. The text of the hymn *Was mein Gott will* was written in 1547 by Duke Albrecht of Brandenburg. Its associated tune, by the French cleric Claudin de Sermisy, had already been published in c. 1530, and was originally intended for a secular text (*Il me souffit de tous mes maux*). As Whittaker points out, the tune presented Bach with some compositional challenges, especially in its somewhat repetitive cadence structure, stepwise contour, and, most obviously, modal outline.¹ Nevertheless, the tune was clearly popular, and Bach left some half-dozen different harmonisations.²

Bach's Chorale Cantata cycle can perhaps be considered the greatest outpouring of mankind's musical creativity; the incredible succession of masterpieces is strikingly illustrated by the sequence for early 1725, which, in addition to works for the four Sunday services, included cantatas for New-year's day and the Feast of the Epiphany (the visit of the three wise men – celebrated on 6th January). *Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit*, designated for the third Sunday after Epiphany, was first performed on 25th January 1725. The unknown cantata librettist had retained, without modification, the first and last of the four hymn verses for the outer (choral) movements. The second and third verses of the hymn were re-written to provide the text for the four inner movements (aria – recit. – duet – recit.). Although the text of the hymn is not itself directly related to the bible readings for the day,³ in paraphrasing the hymn, the librettist has forged some implicit connections.

¹ W. Gillies Whittaker, *The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach*, London: OUP, 1959, pp 402–407. 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.

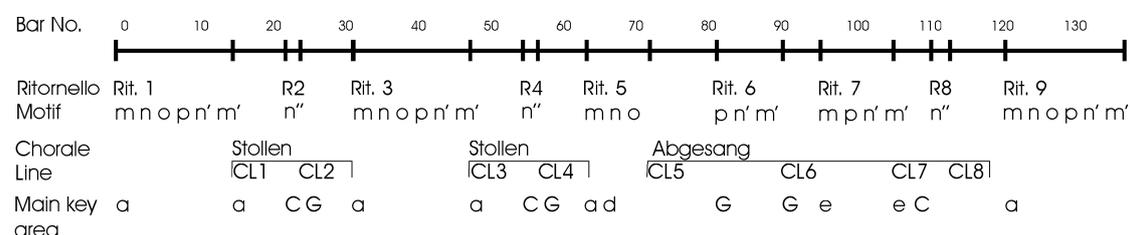
² The tune was also sung with the text, *Ich hab in Gottes Herz und Sinn*. In C. S. Terry, *The Four-part Chorals of J. S. Bach*, these are nos. 357–363 (no. 358 is from the cantata being discussed); Terry provides the original text for the hymn with nos. 357–8. In the Riemenschneider edition, the harmonisations are nos. 41, 115, 120, 265 and 349.

³ Romans ch.12, vv 17–21, and Matthew ch. 8 vv 1–13.

The powerful opening chorus – scored for two oboes, strings, continuo and four-part choir⁴ – 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; he arranged several of Vivaldi’s concertos from *L’Estro Armonico*, Op. 3, for keyboard. Characteristically, in a baroque concerto, there is a distinctive textural contrast between the ritornello theme played by the full ensemble (*tutti*) and the solo episodes, which are usually more lightly scored. Conceptually, in the chorale cantata, this has been replaced by a tonal contrast between the instrumental ritornello passages and the accompanied chorale phrases, sung as a *cantus firmus* in the soprano. The chorale tune itself is cast in Barform: the first two melodic lines⁵, 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 1–32 are repeated as bars 32–63; bars 64–136 include the *Abgesang*. An overview of the structure is shown in Example 1.

Example 1. Diagram of Structure of Opening Chorus.

(Rit. 1, R2 = Ritornello 1, Ritornello 2; m, n, o, p = motifs from ritornello theme; CL1 = Chorale Line 1; a = a minor; C = C major.)



The forceful thematic material of the ritornello is treated with great economy throughout the movement, reflecting both the intensity of Bach’s compositional process and the severe time constraints under which he was working – the cantata was probably composed, copied, rehearsed and performed within the space of a week. The surviving holographic manuscript bears witness to this frenetic creativity, with its apparently rapid handwriting and frequent corrections.⁶ The reiterated tonic-dominant block chords of the opening bars emphatically announce the tonic key (shown as motif m in Example 1). The bass of bars 3–6 outlines A – G – F – E, a descending melodic-minor pattern (n) which anticipates the modality of the chorale tune (the second note of which is G). A dominant pedal in the bass (o, b. 7–8) is followed by a sequence of quite strident suspensions (p, b. 9–10); the descending bass phrase recurs as n’ in b. 11–14 (now E – D – C – B) and the tonic-dominant chording in bars 15-16 (m’).

The ritornello theme recurs throughout the movement, variously truncated and transposed, then in full again at the end. Alternating with the ritornello, the hymn tune appears in long notes (minims and semibreves) in the soprano part as a *cantus firmus*. Against this hymn tune, the lower voices sing imitative phrases, in shorter

⁴ Bach’s chorus may have comprised four solo voices; the upper string parts were doubled (as the existence of additional copied parts indicates).

⁵ In a chorale tune, the end of each melodic line is traditionally demarcated with a pause (fermata) sign.

⁶ J. S. Bach *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* Series I/6 page VIII [facsimile of first page of score].

partially repeated: bb. 41—45 correspond with 4—9, more or less exactly, while the subsequent section has been transposed (variously up a fourth or down a fifth) to finish on the tonic rather than the dominant.

The alto recitative paraphrases the remainder of the second verse of the hymn. The fourth movement, an extended duet for alto and tenor, in some ways represents the heart of the work, and is remarkable in many respects, notably for the change of mood (now in G major) and for its impassioned virtuosity. The jaunty skipping of the melody represents the ‘courageous steps’ which lead even to the grave. In Lutheran orthodoxy death was considered life’s goal, as expounded in the fifth movement, an accompanied recitative for soprano. In common with many of Bach’s works exploring this theme, the overall emotion of the alto-tenor duet is radiantly life-affirming, although there are some notable chromaticisms on ‘Grabe’ (grave) and dominant minor-ninth chords on ‘Todes Bitterkeit’ (death’s bitterness). Elsewhere, Bach sometimes renders every nuance of the text in musical imagery, though whether the surging arpeggios in the first violin (bb. 8—11) and the subsequent figuration alternating around an open D-string pedal note convey specific meanings must remain conjectural.⁷

In common with most of Bach’s cantatas, the final movement is a straightforward chorale setting in four-part harmony, the voices being doubled by the instruments throughout.

⁷ Klaus Hoffman, in booklet liner notes to Masaaki Suzuki’s Cantata recordings Vol. 32 (BIS—SACD 1501) p. 6, suggests that the latter motif may relate to the text from the central section ‘Gott hat die Tage aufgeschrieben’ [‘God has numbered the days’], but this motif does not actually occur simultaneously with that text, so its origin is perhaps less specific.