

What is a Cantata?

The term 'cantata', invented in Italy in the 17th century, refers to a piece of music written for voice or voices and instruments. It applies broadly to works for solo voice, multiple soloists, vocal ensemble, and with instrumental accompaniment of keyboard or instrumental ensemble. It can be a single movement work or consist of multiple movements, and the text can be either sacred or secular. It tended to replace the older terms and forms of the motet and the madrigal, more popular in the Renaissance, and in general reflected a preference for the solo voice.

By Bach's time (1685-1750), cantatas were generally works that contained several movements or distinct sections with tempo and key changes. If a work did not feature a solo voice at any point, it was usually called a motet instead of a cantata. The composers in Germany were quite familiar with the Italian cantata, and copied its structure.

Bach's immediate predecessors, including Buxtehude and earlier generations of the Bach family, were active creators of cantatas – generally sacred works based on Biblical texts, or sometimes on choral texts from the previous century. These types of cantatas were usually performed during a Lutheran church service.

What is a Bach cantata?

Bach's earliest compositions in this form adhere to the structure of the 17th century cantata: a work in several sections, including tempo, meter, and key changes, but highly integrated and often without any interruption. A vocal ensemble or chorus generally began and ended the piece, unless it was preceded by an instrumental *sinfonia* – a movement for orchestra alone, generally meditative, using musical material unrelated to subsequent movements. It's clear from Bach's own writings and his overall oeuvre, however, that he was interested in expanding and reinventing this form.

What was the purpose of the cantata in Bach's time?

The Lutheran church services during the early 18th century were lengthy by our standards – running close to three hours including readings, a sermon, and hymn (chorale) singing. Luther was an advocate for music as an art form that inspired spiritual devotion, so musical settings of Psalms and other Biblical passages were popular interludes during the service. The cantata as a genre was generally placed after the sermon (or two-part works bracketing the sermon) to serve as a musical counterpart to the preacher's message.

Where did Bach get his texts?

Bach's early cantatas generally conform to the 17th century model for sacred vocal works – using pre-existing Biblical or chorale texts. But by 1714 he begins to use librettos – pre-existing poems written by contemporaries which expand on a Biblical or liturgical theme and explore some of the personal implications for the believer. These libretti generally consist of five or more movements, including recitative and aria sections. There were many people composing sacred libretti during Bach's lifetime, and we are only aware of a few individuals whose libretti Bach set – most of them are anonymous.

How many cantatas did Bach write?

The official listing of Bach's works, the Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis (abbreviated BWV) begins with the cantatas. The numbering of these works have nothing to do with either the date of composition or the liturgical calendar, but rather reflects the order in which the works were officially cataloged. This list numbers 200 sacred cantatas and 16 secular works (pieces composed for honorary celebrations of a patron's birthday, or other occasions).

Prior to Bach's appointment in Leipzig in 1723 he had written less than 35 cantatas. When he arrived in Leipzig he undertook a project to compose a new cantata for every Sunday and feast day of the church year. During the first five years of this project he composed some 300 cantatas; however at least a third of these have been lost. Bach's total output of vocal works includes the six motets; three Passions and several oratorio-length pieces; and a number of secular cantatas written for public occasions of mourning or celebration.

What is a chorale?

A Lutheran chorale is a hymn intended to be sung by the congregation during a service. These works are based on tunes from the early 16th century, or even earlier, which were adapted by early Lutherans for the new faith. The chorale texts, sometimes running to 20 verses, also largely date from the Renaissance. Many of the texts were authored by Martin Luther, but there were many chorale writers and composers, and often several sets of texts were associated with the same tune.

These tunes and texts were very familiar to Bach's congregation, and he employed them in the vast majority of his cantatas. The most common use of chorales was as a conclusion to the piece, generally in a four-part harmonization where the tune would be prominently audible. But Bach incorporated the melodies and the texts in many different ways – there is an entire cycle of cantatas based entirely on chorales, where the chorale is featured in every movement. Clearly the use of chorales enabled Bach to

reach out to his listeners in a very immediate way—a familiar phrase could automatically recall the rest of the content and add a layer of meaning to the music.

What is an aria?

An aria is a movement for a solo voice (or sometimes, duet or trio) and instrumental accompaniment. The Bach aria was composed to a section of the libretto in a regular meter, generally with symmetrical rhyming lines. Bach arias sometimes feature a solo (obbligato) instrument, and sometimes are written for the full orchestra to accompany.

What is a recitative?

A recitative, invented in 17th century Italy by the pioneers of opera, is a sung movement that is meant to resemble speech. It generally has very sparse accompaniment (keyboard and bowed bass instrument) and the singer has many words to sing on short note values. The structure of a recitative is much more fluid than that of an aria; it is not built out of melody but rather a harmonic progression. The voice part outlines and embellishes this progression, while declaiming the text in natural speech rhythms.

The recitative sections of the libretti were more narrative or dramatic than the arias, focusing on explaining or preaching a concept to the congregation. They were generally longer than the aria texts, and not as tightly structured in their meter, rhyme scheme, or overall line count. Some Bach recitatives are constructed as duets – dialogues between two voices, sometimes given actual character names such as Jesus and the Soul; some are composed with full instrumental accompaniment, and are called *accompagnato*. These orchestrated movements tend to be more emotionally elevated than the plain, *secco* [dry] recitatives.

How does Emmanuel Music perform Bach cantatas?

The tradition of performing Bach cantatas weekly during the Episcopal church service at Emmanuel Church began in 1970, under the direction of founding Music Director Craig Smith. The cantata service has continued for more than 40 years, through the present day, from September through May, and the cantata is presented after the Eucharist but before the final prayer, as a meditation. While this location in the service does not correspond to its historical position in Bach's time, it effectively focuses the trajectory of the service to its climactic moment of sacred communion with the divine.

What makes a Bach cantata special?

While many of Bach's contemporaries were actively engaged in writing cantatas (Telemann being the most well-known), Bach seized on this form to do some of his most experimental composition. He frequently used his musical ideas to illuminate, deepen, and sometimes contradict the message found in the text. The cantata in Bach's hands morphed from being a work of devotion to being a work of penetrating psychological exploration; every emotion is laid bare and dissected, and the painful paradoxes of being human, desiring the Good but falling into temptation, fear, and sin, are brought to vivid life by Bach's music. Every musical device available to an 18th century composer is put into service, and Bach invents countless new ones in order to startle his listeners into engagement with the subject. The complexity, ambition, and harmonic daring of the greatest Bach cantatas have absolutely no rival among Baroque composers, and were probably puzzling and disturbing to his first listeners, as they can also be to us today. At Emmanuel, we find in the power, brilliance, and immediacy of Bach's music a poignant representation of the human condition and humanity's relationship with God and eternity.

PERIODS IN BACH'S CANTATA OEUVRE:

Early works (1703-1708): Arnstadt, Mühlentberg (BWV 4, BWV 71, BWV 106, BWV 131, BWV 196)

Cantatas from this period resemble works from the end of the 17th century; chamber-sized, with few if any recitatives or large da capo arias. Material is tightly linked together by Biblical references.

Weimar (1714-1717): BWV 63, BWV 199 (also BWV 12, BWV 182, BWV 61, etc)

The Weimar cantatas are distinguished by experimentation in instrumentation, structure, and expressive devices. Assigned to compose one cantata a month, Bach flourished and began to find his true compositional voice. Important librettists from this period include Salomo Franck, Georg Christian Lehms, and Johann Michael Heinicus.

Cöthen (1717-1723): (BWV 202, BWV 206, etc)

In Cöthen he wrote no sacred music and the vocal works are all celebrations of the ruler or the season. Many of these pieces were later recycled into liturgical cantatas in Leipzig.

Leipzig Jahrgang I (June 1723-June 1724): BWV 147, BWV 179

Prodigious output of weekly cantatas began – and the vastly expanded resources available to Bach produced masterpiece after masterpiece.

Leipzig Jahrgang II (June 1724-June 1725): BWV 3, BWV 26, BWV 7, BWV 41, BWV 78, BWV 103, BWV 113, BWV 123, BWV 115

At the start of the 2nd Jahrgang, Bach embarked on a cycle of 'chorale' cantatas; each week the piece would be constructed from a different church hymn. Sometimes the melody would be present throughout, other times only the opening and closing movement would feature the tune; but the libretto would be thoroughly imbued with the concepts and text of the chorale. At the end of this cycle come a number of sophisticated doctrinal works related to the Gospel of John, with libretti mostly by Christiane Marianne von Ziegler.

Leipzig Jahrgang III (June 1725-June 1726): BWV 49, BWV 57, BWV 72

Many pieces from this cycle have been lost; Bach's compositional approach is less systematic in this year, but still quite ambitious.

Leipzig Jahrgang IV (June 1726-June 1727): BWV 27, BWV 49, BWV 102, BWV 157, BWV 187

After the first Sunday in Advent in 1726, Bach's fourth cycle of cantatas becomes very spotty. Either repeats of earlier pieces or the works of other composers were the norm with very few new pieces. By this time Bach was rather disheartened by the level of playing in the orchestra and began to feature the organ as the principal instrument. Also by this time his son Carl Phillip Emmanuel was old enough to be playing keyboard continuo. Those pieces that were first performed at this time are, however, a great but small group. All these works show a new inward, and very personal, side to Bach's writing, including more solo cantatas, works with large opening instrumental movements, and virtuoso obbligati for organ and other instruments.

Later works (1730s-1740s): (BWV 11, BWV 140, B-minor Mass)

By this point in Bach's career, he had turned his attention to other musical forms. The B-minor Mass, the Xmas Oratorio, and many secular and instrumental works date from this period. Fewer and fewer church cantatas were being composed, and some were reworkings of earlier material. However, some great masterpieces date from this period, including "Wachet auf" and "Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen".