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Drama in the J.S. Bach Cantata 140 ("Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme")

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Drama in the J.S. Bach *Cantata 140* ("Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme")

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ABSTRACT

The cantatas of J.S. Bach are masterful choral works, well representing the choral achievements of the great baroque cantor and master of counterpoint. A collection of cantata movements, the monumental Bach *Mass in B Minor*, a late work, may be viewed as a string of cantatas. In an age when borrowing was the expected practice, Bach produced many cantatas using previously composed material. Well over two hundred cantatas by Bach are known to exist today. Among these, the *Cantata 140* ("Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme"), BWV 140, is an example of Bach's choral achievement of uniting text to music.

INTRODUCTION

Johann Sebastian Bach is certainly one of the best known composers of all time. His fame can be attributed not only to his remarkable skills in writing music, but more significantly, to the meaning of the texts he chose and how his music exemplifies them. No composer has ever matched Bach's ability to portray the meaning and emotion of these important texts. His music goes beyond simple text painting into a realm of music unlike any other. While it is unlikely that anyone will ever be able to fully understand how such magnificent writing was accomplished, we can broaden our knowledge of Bach's techniques in hopes of appreciating even more the inspiring nature of his masterpieces.

We must begin by examining the history of Bach's life and the world during the time he was composing, especially within the church. Sixteenth-century Europe was full of new and conflicting ideas. The Reformation was sweeping the continent, prompting people to re-examine the very foundations upon which they had based their lives. Individuals and society were forced to make decisions about what was truly important. No longer were common beliefs merely accepted, but rather, every opinion was questioned. This was particularly true in regard to religion. For centuries Catholicism had been the predominant faith throughout Europe, but as the Reformation brought along new ideas, some radical thinkers began to scrutinize its policies.

The most well-known—and probably most accepted—doctrine opposing Catholicism at the time was that proposed by Martin Luther. Luther disagreed strongly with the doctrines of the Catholic Church and outlined which aspects of faith he believed to be essential to salvation. He developed a new liturgy that emphasized these aspects and

turned the focus of worship away from the earthly service practices of the Catholics. While other Reformers questioned the use of music in worship, Luther regarded it very highly and made it an integral part of the worship service to praise God for His grace through Jesus Christ (Butt, 36-40).

More than a century later, another Lutheran came about who also recognized the vital role of liturgical music and transformed its use both inside and outside the church forever. Though not fully recognized for the significance of his works until after his death, Johann Sebastian Bach would become the greatest composer of sacred and liturgical music ever. Bach's sacred cantatas were typically composed to correspond with the biblical readings and general presentation of the particular day, season, or celebration of the church year (Butt, 35). As cantor at St. Thomas's School, Bach was required to prepare music for services at the churches of St. Thomas and St. Nicholas. In total, he composed fifty-eight cantatas a year, as well as special music for Good Friday, Magnificats at Vespers, one cantata each year for the installation of the city council, and funeral motets and wedding cantatas. Between 1723 and 1729, Bach composed four complete yearly cycles consisting of about 60 cantatas each (Greer, 539).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

One such cantata is his *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, BWV 140. Composed for the twenty-seventh Sunday after Trinity, it relates the story from Matthew 25:1-13, about the ten virgins watching for the nighttime arrival of the bridegroom (Christ). The texts for the opening chorus, a chorale movement for tenors, and the final chorus are derived from Picander's arrangement of a chorale by Philipp Nicolai (Young, 120). The remaining poetry for the recitatives and arias is related to the same Matthew reference, but it is from an unknown author (Palisca, 546).

This cantata follows Bach's typical symmetrical pattern with a tenor-chorale stanza outlined by two recitative-aria sets and chorale-choruses at the beginning and ending. Characteristics of Bach's compositional style for cantatas occur throughout these seven movements (Palisca, 546). A general outline and analysis of the cantata, primarily the opening chorus, will allow us to identify Bach's unique manner of writing and examine how the music is suited to fit the text.

Wachet auf is an excellent example of Bach's writing. As in most of Bach's chorale cantatas, the opening movement is the most elaborate. This opening is particularly exciting (Palisca, 546). It is based on a sixteen-measure ritornello modeled on the ritornello structure of an instrumental concerto. This ritornello and variations on it can be found throughout the opening section. The complete pattern appears between the two Stollen (lines 1-3 and 4-6) of the chorale and again at the end of the opening. An abridged version is found before the Abgesang (lines 7-12). If the ritornello is divided into four equal sections, four individual motives are clearly evident, which can be heard at various points throughout the chorus (Palisca, 547).

Upon looking more closely at each section of the opening chorus, one can begin to see beyond the basic notes and words to understand the significance of each passage. For example, in the first four measures (Figure 1), one hears a similar three-chord pattern

repeated four times indicating the chiming of bells as the watchman announces the midnight hour (Palisca, 547).
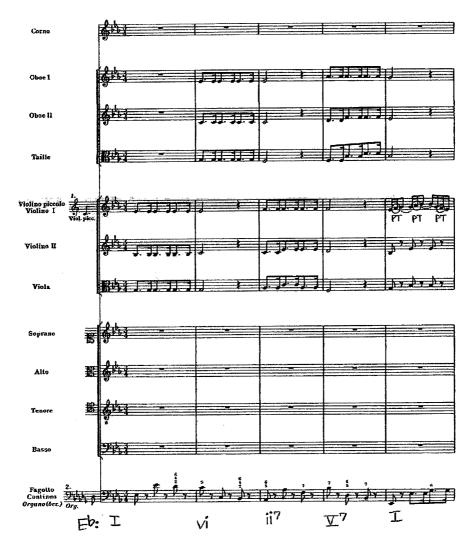

Figure 1. Opening of *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*: "Wachet auf" (movt. I)

Following this, the first violins play a steady step-motive more impatient and anxious, which is portrayed by the fast, rising figure in the first violin in tempo, which signifies the

march of the approaching wedding procession. part (Palisca, 547). It is this type of text-painting that makes Bach's works remarkable. As this rhythm continues, it becomes more dramatic to represent the growing anticipation By the end of the opening chorus, one can easily feel the blissful restlessness of the of the awakening virgins (Young, 120). Beginning in measure nine, the virgins grow ever virgins as they await the arrival of the Bridegroom. This emotion builds during the entire chorus so that by the beginning of the jubilant "Alleluja" chant at measure 135, the people in the audience are as excited as the women in the narrative (Young, 120).

As is common with older compositions, the original score lacks definite dynamic markings, which allows for certain expressive interpretations to be made by the conductor and musicians. For an example, one can look at the very opening passage. Thomas Braatz mentions in his commentary that Julius Stockhausen used to bring the orchestra in very softly and gradually crescendo to evoke the mental image of the approaching assembly. In contrast, Siegfried Ochs prefers to begin forte with a fast tempo to reflect the chaos and confusion caused by the sudden "Wachet auf!" Braatz proposes the latter is "certainly the right way," but it would seem that either could be considered a reasonable option. In fact, it could be argued that both are appropriate at different points in the music.

One characteristic of *Wachet auf* which sets it apart from most of Bach's cantatas and compositions in general is its dramatic feel. It is inaccurate to imply that Bach's works were not full of energy and life, essentials for good drama. Bach evidently focused, however, on musical quality rather than theatrical intensity (Day, 44). More than the texts of other cantatas, the text of this cantata clearly tells a story of the wedding of the soul to its Savior. This story unfolds through seven separate movements, which could be considered acts. Critical to every story are the characters, which can here be easily identified. The tenor is the voice of the watchman, who also serves as narrator. Christ is represented by the bass soloist. His bride, the soul, is played by the soprano. These traits, along with the strong sense of great excitement and elation felt throughout the entire work, give it a very theatrical quality (Day, 44).

CONCLUSION

Wachet auf may be unique among Bach cantatas in its somewhat dramatic style, but it is still obviously the work of the one and only Johann Sebastian Bach. Only the greatest master of sacred choral works could produce a piece as eloquent as this. A complete visualization of the parable that is being portrayed here can occur through the remarkable skill that only Bach can offer. His ability to compose music that so perfectly matches and complements the text has remained unparalleled for almost 300 years. Even those who may have disagreed with the ways his music was used in worship could not argue against the incredible talent Bach possessed for such writing. We must all admire and take inspiration from the greatest sacred works ever composed and the man who is responsible for their existence.

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