

BACH'S ESCAPE LADDER
Cantata No. 12, "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen"
An Overview
For the ASO Chamber Chorus
(By Jeffrey Baxter – April 22, 2020)

REFERENCE MATERIALS

1. Audio – [CLICK HERE](#) for a performance by Ton Koopman and the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra & Choir.
2. Full Score – [CLICK here](#) to access a full score of the cantata.

GENESIS

Bach composed his cantata, BWV 12, for the third Sunday after Easter, April 22, 1714, and later revived it at his post in Leipzig in 1724. The 1714 composition was part of Bach's new duties at the Weimar court that came with his promotion from Organist/Chamber Musician to *Konzertmeister*. He was tasked to "perform new works every month," including a regular supply of cantatas – a challenge that Bach was keen to accept. His work and interest in this most modern sacred genre of the time had started with his posts in Anstadt and Mühlhausen, but the rare opportunities there (to compose these "occasional" pieces for special events) could hardly contain his vast ambition and passion for the possibilities of the form – a form which he would devote his life to in an exhaustive and encyclopedic exploration. By the end of Bach's career in Leipzig (1723-1750), he composed, re-composed, and compiled from his earlier writings some 300 cantatas (of which about 200 have survived) to serve as a five-year *Jahrgang*, or cycle, for the needs of the rotating liturgical year.

But it was Weimar – with its princely resources of the Palace Church (Schlosskirche), organ, musicians, and court poet, Salomo Franck – that gave Bach the great start for what would later make him the master of the cantata, establishing the defining pinnacle of the form.

While the texts of his pre-Weimar cantatas were largely Bible-verses or German chorale (hymn) texts, the works written in Weimar from 1714 onwards all share a similar form, consisting of:

1. Lines from the Bible, usually involving choral settings,
2. Recitatives for vocal soloists, set to newly written words with no fixed meter or rhyme-scheme,
3. Vocal Arias set to new words with fixed meter and rhyme-scheme, generally set as in an A-B-A, or *da capo aria* form,
4. a pre-existing Chorale-tune harmonized in four parts, mostly set as a final choral movement.

Bach unleashed his imagination, employing a wide range of vocal and instrumental combinations in an unparalleled richness of musical invention with an astonishing wealth of formal ideas and compositional techniques. -So much so, that in 1714 this newly promoted "employee" was able to convince his Weimar "boss" to move the weekly cantata-rehearsals from the Kapellmeister's lodgings (!) to the Schlosskirche.

FORM

Like the other two surviving cantatas written around this time in 1714 (BWV 182 and 172), BWV 12 shares the same "librettist," Salomo Franck, and a similar design of chorus, recitative/biblical quotation, three arias, and a final chorale:

BWV 12. "Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen"

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|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Sinfonia (oboe and strings) | |
| 2. Chorus (SATB): <i>Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen</i> | [poetic text by Franck] |
| 3. Recitative (alto): <i>Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal</i> | [biblical text, from Acts 14:22] |
| 4. Aria (alto): <i>Kreuz und Kronen sind verbunden</i> | [poetic text by Franck] |
| 5. Aria (bass): <i>Ich folge Christo nach</i> | [poetic text by Franck] |
| 6. Aria (tenor): <i>Sei getreu</i> | [poetic text by Franck] |
| 7. Chorale: <i>Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan</i> | [chorale-text of Samuel Rodigast] |

While the chorale is not used as a musically unifying device throughout (as Bach employs in other cantatas, like BWV 80, "Ein feste Burg"), there are in BWV 12 subtle quotes and reflections of the final chorale-tune, *Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan* [What God ordains is always best].

The prescribed readings for that Sunday in 1714 were from the First Epistle of Peter, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man... for this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully" (1 Peter 2:11–20), and from the Gospel of John, Jesus announcing his second coming and saying "your sorrow shall be turned into joy" (John 16:16–23).

MOVEMENT 1. SINFONIA

To mark the progression from sorrow to (promised) joy in this cantata, Bach begins with an instrumental introduction, a doleful solo oboe melody, marked *Adagio assai*, accompanied by strings. The texture of five-part string-writing (divided violas) shows Bach's knowledge of the French style, as well that of the music of Buxtehude.

Bach paints a textured musical canvas, with four layers of rhythmic values (bottom to top):

Oboe = thirty-second notes

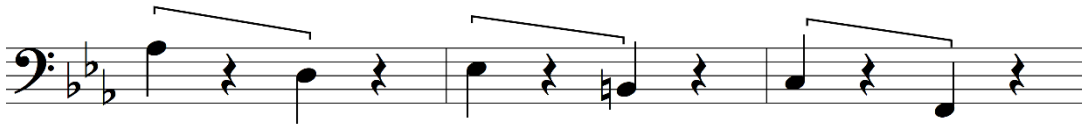
Violins = sixteenth notes

Violas = eighth notes

Bass = quarter notes

The slow-moving, quarter-note bass-line of quarter-(rest)-quarter-(rest) is possibly evocative of the *via dolorosa*, complete with Christ's faltering footsteps at the fermata at m. 14.

The descending intervals in the bass-line of ms. 5-7,



are an "anguished" version of the second half of the finale chorale-tune:



An ascending portion of a C-major scale in the bass-line at ms. 9-11 begins to build tension towards the ultimate heart-wrenching cadential fermata at m. 14 (the complete C-major scale will be seen later, in the Violin I part of Mvt. 3. Recitative). Interestingly, those first five ascending notes of the scale foreshadow the spiritual "resolution" achieved in the final chorale, in the shape of chorale-tune's distinctive (B-flat Major) ascending opening phrase:



Is it coincidence, or, rather, amazingly intuitive creative expression, that this moment at m. 9 occurs at the movement's Golden Mean? In the musical art, this is where something significant (a "high" point) occurs a little over halfway, at or around 0.618 of the whole number of measures. This "golden" proportion – along with a preoccupation with numerology – appears often in Bach's writing (and even planning, with the publication of the some later works, even as regards their movement numbers and prescribed number of pages). It appears later in this cantata as well, in the next movement.

MOVEMENT 2. CHORUS

Franck's text for this 4-part choral setting is:

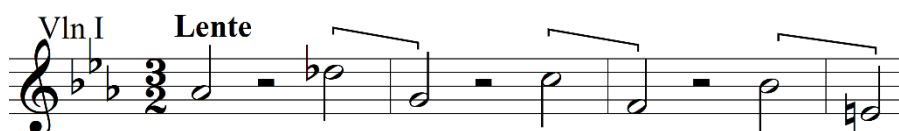
*Weinen, Klagen,
Sorgen, Zagen,
Angst und Not
Sind der Christen Tränenbrot,
Die das Zeichen Jesu tragen.*

Weeping, lamentation,
worry, despair,
anguish and need
are the tearful bread of Christians,
who bear the signs of Jesus.

Many will recognize this music as the model for the "Crucifixus" in Bach's later *B-Minor Mass*. But here it is presented in an A-B-A form, whose A-part (the first four lines of text) is an impressively constructed passacaglia – or chaconne – marked *Lente*, with a chorus of weeping and wailing set over a descending ground bass (ostinato) figure in twelve statements.

The whole movement (with *da capo*) consists of 141 measures. Some have wondered if the number of measures in this movement (and mvts. 4, 5, and 6) correspond to the number of one of the biblical Psalms. Psalm 141 reads: "Lord, I cry unto Thee."

The descending intervals in Violin I at the beginning of this movement (like the Sinfonia's bass-line):



suggest an "anguished" version of the second half of the choral-tune:



The Golden Mean of the passacaglia (the A-section), around m. 24, is the first moment of homophonic text-setting (in the Crucifixus of the *B-Minor Mass*, this becomes "passus est"). The conductor, John Eliot Gardiner, said of this moment, "Even when conducting the Crucifixus version I cannot rid my mind of the thrice-articulated 'Angst... und... Not.' If this is the nadir, the point, according to the scholar Eric Chafe, 'where the individual has already been brought by consciousness of sin to extreme torment' then rarely, if ever, have these sentiments been so harrowingly portrayed in music."

The melody at m. 31 twists around ("crosses") itself in anguish. It is no wonder Bach returned to this music for his "Crucifixus" (or maybe he had it in mind all the time, for a possible Mass setting?), as it is so perfectly structured here for text-painting of the word "crucifixus" ("crucified").

The 12th statement of the ostinato figure in the basso continuo, at ms. 44-49, is without voices. Is this empty statement meant to represent one of the twelve disciples, Judas, who betrayed Jesus?

The B-section of this movement ("Die das Zeichen") is a faster-moving motet, with *colla-parte* instrumental writing (instruments intended to double the voices), marked *un poco allegro*. The word "tragen" (bear, or carry) is "carried" by a melismatic vocal treatment of many notes per syllable. Also, the number of measures of music in this B-section is 44 (or 22 twice). Could that relate to Psalm 22 (the Psalm of Christ), the one that declares, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

MOVEMENT 3. RECITATIVO

Bach structures this setting of the text from the book of Acts ("We must through much tribulation enter the kingdom of God") as a slow-moving short *accompagnato* alto recitative (measured, with string accompaniment). The outer orchestral voices move in contrary motion (Violin 1 in an ascending C-major scale to a high C; the basso continuo, down to a low C) to depict the wide gulf between God and Man (or between despair and rejoicing).

MOVEMENT 4. ARIA

Franck's text, "Kreuz und Kronen sind verbunden" (Cross and crown are bound together), is set for the alto voice and accompanied by oboe and basso continuo. The introductory C-minor music of the oboe features figuration (16th and 32nd notes) that echoes the opening Sinfonia. Bach carefully dovetails this figuration, alternating between oboe and bass, to surround the singer at m. 27, as the text describes being surrounded by "Kampf" (struggle).

There are 62 measures in this movement; Psalm 62 (v. 3-5) reads: "...ye shall be slain all of you: as a bowing wall shall ye be, and as a tottering fence. They only consult to cast him down...My soul, wait thou only upon God."

MOVEMENT 5. ARIA

In this movement, set for bass-voice and strings, the text "Ich folge Christo nach" (I follow after Christ) is depicted in the imitative use of the opening phrase of the final chorale-tune ("Was Gott tut das ist wohlgetan"): Violin 2 follows Violin 1, followed by basso continuo and ultimately, the voice. It is in the form of an Italianate trio-sonata.

The steady, walking bass-line also "holds" the piece together, reflective of the text "von Ihm will ich nicht lassen" (I will "hold fast" to him. -Literally, I will not forsake him).

There are 40 measures in this movement; Ps. 40 reads "I waited on the Lord, He inclined unto me."

MOVEMENT 6. ARIA

For this movement Bach chooses the tenor voice (accompanied by basso continuo) and interjects in an obbligato trumpet-line, another chorale tune in commentary. The form is a chorale-prelude as we know it well from Bach's many examples of this skillful writing, where the chorale-tune in slower note-values is introduced and surrounded by faster-moving music to "accompany" it. Here, however, the chorale-tune played by the trumpet is "Jesu, meine Freude" (not the final chorale of this cantata).

Franck's text reads "Sei getreu, alle Pein wird doch nur ein Kleines sein" (be faithful, all pain will but a trifle be), so why has Bach chosen to quote "Jesu, meine Freude" (Jesus, my Joy)? Perhaps here it really is worth considering the Psalm/measure-count correspondence: there are 95 measures, and Psalm 95 (v. 7) reads:

"for He is our God, and we are the people of his *pasture*."

The chorale-text reads: "Jesu, meine Freude, meines Herzens *Weide*"

(Jesus my Joy, my heart's *pasture* [or *meadow*].)

MOVEMENT 7. CHORALE

Bach sums up this piece as he does many of his cantatas, with a straightforward 4-part harmonization of the chorale-tune – this time, including a descant above for trumpet and Violin 1.

John Eliot Gardiner has described the entire cantata as an escape ladder that Bach lowered into a pit of despair, with every rung etched into the music. Each movement ascends by intervals of a third, alternating a minor key with its relative major: f, A-flat, C, E-flat, g, B-flat, with the final chorale "like a hand outstretched to help the believer, on the last rung of the ladder, in his struggle to attain faith."

Could there be a more eloquent escape route to our humanity?

I look forward to escaping with you again one day soon, to sing music like this.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Baxter
Choral Administrator
Atlanta Symphony Orchestra