

Advent in the Company of JS Bach
Cantata BWV 61
Nun komm der Heiden Heiland

Advent in the time of Bach

- Bach's cantatas for the First Sunday in Advent (like his other cantatas) are essentially sermons in music; they are theologically and emotionally-rich articulations of the themes of the Advent season.
- In these works, Bach achieves a remarkable synthesis between the old and new forms at his disposal (textual and musical) and a harmonious balance of the theological complexities of Christ's "Advent"—his incarnation, his ongoing presence in the church, and his second coming.
- Bach's music vividly underscores the paradoxes of Advent and the incarnation: joy, yet solemnity and expectation; light in the midst of darkness; divine power manifested in human weakness (as the "Ruler of Heaven" comes to earth as a baby);
- Royal magnificence and intimacy (seen in the image of Christ knocking on the door); and peace and clamour (the response of wonder at the mystery of the incarnation).

Readings for Advent 1

- The Scripture Lessons for the First Sunday in Advent
- The designated scripture lessons for Advent 1, the first Sunday of the liturgical year, are Romans 13:11-14 (the epistle) and Matthew 21:1-9 (the Gospel). These texts illustrate the theological complexity of the incarnation and the ways in which Christ "comes" to his people. The epistle focuses on watchfulness and righteous living:
- *Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.* (Romans 13:11-14, NRSV)
- *When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: "Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"* (Matthew 21:1-9)

Cantata BWV 61

- Johann Sebastian Bach composed the church cantata Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland (Now come, Savior of the heathens), BWV 61, in Weimar.
- He composed it for the first Sunday in Advent, the Sunday which begins the liturgical year, and first performed it on 2 December 1714.
- The cantata text was provided by Erdmann Neumeister, who quoted the Book of Revelation and framed his work by two hymn stanzas:
- (1) the beginning of Martin Luther's "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland", the main hymn for Advent with a melody based on Medieval chant,
- (2) the end from Philipp Nicolai's "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern".
- The librettist developed his thoughts like a sermon. Bach structured the cantata in six movements, beginning with a chorale fantasia, followed by a series of alternating recitatives and arias, and concluded by a four-part chorale.
- He scored it for three vocal soloists (soprano, tenor and bass), strings and continuo. Bach led the first performance on 2 December 1714.
- As Thomaskantor, director of music of the main churches of Leipzig, he performed the cantata again on 28 November 1723.
- Eisenach (1685-1695)
- Ohrdruf (1695-1700)
- Lüneburg (1700-1703)

- Arnstadt (1703-1707)
- Mühlhausen (1707-1708)
- Weimar (1708-1717)
- Cöthen (1717-1723)
- Leipzig (1723-1750)

Chorale 1

- "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland" (original: "Nu kom der Heyden heyland", English: "Saviour of the nations, come", literally: Now come, Saviour of the heathen) is a Lutheran chorale of 1524 with words written by Martin Luther
- It is based on "Veni redemptor gentium" by Ambrose, and a melody, Zahn 1174, based on its plainchant. It was printed in the Erfurt Enchiridion of 1524.
- The song was the prominent hymn for the first Sunday of Advent for centuries. It was used widely in organ settings by Protestant Baroque composers, most notably Johann Sebastian Bach, who also composed two church cantatas beginning with the hymn.

Nun komm der Heiden Heiland

Movements of *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*

| No. | Title | Text | Type | Vocal | Instruments | Key | Time |
|-----|---|------------|------------------|-------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|
| 1 | Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland | Luther | Chorale fantasia | SATB | 2VI 2Va Vc Fg | A minor | C 3/4 |
| 2 | Der Heiland ist gekommen | Neumeister | Recitative | T | | C major | C |
| 3 | Komm, Jesu, komm zu deiner Kirche | Neumeister | Aria | T | 2VI 2Va (unis.) | C major | 9/8 |
| 4 | Siehe, ich stehe vor der Tür | Neumeister | Recitative | B | 2VI 2Va | | C |
| 5 | Öffne dich, mein ganzes Herze | Neumeister | Aria | S | Vc | G major | 3/4 C |
| 6 | Amen, Amen, komm du schöne Freudenkrone | Nicolai | Chorale | SATB | 2VI 2Va Fg | G major | C |

Performance

- Bach Collegium Japan (BCJ) is composed of an orchestra and a chorus specializing in Baroque music, playing on period instruments.
- It was founded in 1990 by Masaaki Suzuki with the purpose of introducing Japanese audiences to European Baroque music; Suzuki is still the music director.
- The ensemble has recorded all of Bach's cantatas, a project that extended from 1995 to 2018 and accounts for over half of its discography.

Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland,
Now come, saviour of the gentiles,
 Der Jungfrauen Kind erkannt,
Known as child of the virgin;
 Des sich wundert alle Welt,
Of this, all the world marvels:
 Gott solch Geburt ihm bestellt.
God ordained him such a birth.

- Bach marked new church year by creating the opening chorus, "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland" as a chorale fantasia in the style of a French overture (dotted rhythm).
- Sequence slow - fast (fugue) - slow.
- In a French opera performance, the King of France would have entered during the overture; Bach greets a different king.
- The melody of line 1 is first presented in the continuo, then sung by all four voices one after another, accompanied by a solemn dotted rhythm in the orchestra.
- Line 2 is sung by all voices together, accompanied by the orchestra.
- Line 3 is a fast *fugato*, with the instruments playing *colla parte*, marked "gai".
- Line 4 is set as line 2.

Der Heiland ist gekommen,
The saviour has come
 Hat unser armes Fleisch und Blut
Has taken on our poor flesh and blood

An sich genommen
upon himself
 Und nimmet uns zu
And takes us on
 Blutsverwandten an.
as blood relatives.
 O allerhöchstes Gut,
O highest possession
 Was hast du nicht an uns getan?
What have you not done for us?
 Was tust du nicht
What do you not
 Noch täglich an den Deinen?
Still daily do for your own?
 Du kömmst und lässt dein Licht
You come and let your light
 Mit vollem Segen scheinen.
Shine with full blessing

- The recitative for tenor, "Der Heiland ist gekommen" begins *secco* but continues as an *arioso*, with tenor and continuo imitating one another.
- This more lyrical style of recitative derives from early Italian operas and cantatas, where it was known as *mezz'aria* - half aria.
- The words and music convey a powerful sense of awe and wonder at all that God has done for humanity.

Komm, Jesu,
Come, Jesus
 komm zu deiner Kirche
Come to your church
 Und gib ein selig neues Jahr!
And grant a blessed new year
 Befördre deines Namens Ehre,
Promote the honour of your name
 Erhalte die gesunde Lehre
Uphold sound teaching
 Und segne Kanzel und Altar!
And bless pulpit and altar

- The tenor aria, "Komm, Jesu, komm zu deiner Kirche" is accompanied by the violins and violas in unison.
- It is written in the rhythm of a gigue, and the combination of voice, unison strings and continuo gives it the texture of a trio sonata.
- Dürr comments that the use of the unison string ritornello, played even during the vocal passages, provides a "rather pointedly strict and unified character"

Siehe, ich stehe vor der Tür und klopfe an.
Look, I stand before the door and knock
 So jemand meine Stimme hören wird
So, if anyone hears my voice
 und die Tür auf tun,
And opens the door
 zu dem werde ich eingehen und
I will go in to him
 das Abendmahl mit ihm halten
And keep the Lord's supper with him
 und er mit mir.
And he with me.

- Brief but impressive and memorable.
- The quote from Revelation, "Siehe, ich stehe vor der Tür und klopfe an" is given as a recitative to the bass as the *vox Christi* (voice of Christ).
- The knocking on the door is expressed by pizzicato chords in the strings.
- Dürr notes: "The most expressive text-engendered declamation is here ingeniously melted down into a structure only ten bars long but of compelling musical logic."

Öffne dich, mein ganzes Herze,
Open yourself, my whole heart
 Jesus kömmt und ziehet ein.
Jesus comes and enters
 Bin ich gleich nur Staub und Erde,
Even though I am but dust and earth
 Will er mich doch nicht verschmähn,
He will nevertheless not disdain me
 Seine Lust an mir zu sehn,
He will look with delight on me
 Dass ich seine Wohnung werde.
That I may become his dwelling-place
 O wie selig werd ich sein!
O how blessed I will be!

- The response to the invitation is the individual prayer of the soprano, "Öffne dich, mein ganzes Herze".
- The soprano voice = individual response, over against a church response.
- The key lines are set in Section A: "Open, my whole heart: / Jesus comes and moves in." With the warm but minimal cello obbligato in 3/4 time, the human voice is foregrounded in "heartfelt naïveté".
- In Section B the soloist does not marvel at the birth of Christ, as one would expect in an Advent cantata, but rather at Christ's indwelling of the believer: "Though I am but dust and earth," Christ chooses "that I become His dwelling".
- Bach underscores the ecstasy of the believer by having the soprano sing "how blessed (I shall be!)" six times in this middle section of the aria.
- "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern" is a Lutheran hymn by Philipp Nicolai written in 1597 and first published in 1599.
- It inspired musical settings through centuries, notably Bach's chorale cantata *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*, BWV 1.
- Here, Bach make use of only the second half of the tune, perhaps to create a sense of urgency, reflecting the words.

Amen, amen!
Amen, amen!
 Komm, du schöne Freudenkrone,
Come, you beautiful crown of joy
 bleib nicht lange!
Do not delay long!
 Deiner wart ich mit Verlangen.
I wait for you with longing.

- In the closing chorale, "Amen, amen! Komm, du schöne Freudenkrone", Bach sets the Abgesang only of the final stanza of Nicolai's hymn.
- The hymn tune itself, through its very abbreviation, implies a sense of urgency and the feeling of being unable to defer any longer.
- In Bach's setting, the violin adds a jubilant fifth part to the four vocal parts. The violin has to "climb three octaves to convey the extent of the soul's longing for the joys of a future life and the prospect of Jesus returning at the end of time"

Cantata 61: Netherlands Bach Society

Later versions

- Bach set it as the opening chorale prelude (BWV 599) of the *Orgelbüchlein* and three times—as BWV 659 (one of his best known organ compositions), BWV 660 and BWV 661—in his *Great Eighteen Chorale Preludes*.
- Performance: Gianandrea Pauletta on the D. Kleuker organ of the church of SS PATRONI in Marcon (Italy).