

ADVENT IN THE COMPANY OF JS BACH
Cantata BWV 62
Nun komm der Heiden Heiland
<https://www.tarsus.ie/Bach-2025/>



Cantata 62

- BWV 62 is a compact jewel of the chorale cantata cycle: elegant, energetic, and spiritually profound.
- It uses Luther's hymn not as a historical artefact but as a living lens through which the Advent mystery is re-experienced.
- The work has symmetry, thematic clarity, and a subtlety that rewards repeated listening.
- The cantata comprises six movements, alternating between brilliant choral writing, expressive arias, and reflective recitative, all framed by Luther's hymn in opening and closing movements.

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)

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 fulfil 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)

Bach in Leipzig

- In 1723, Bach was appointed *Thomaskantor* (director of church music) in Leipzig
- He was responsible for the music at four churches, and for the training and education of boys singing in the *Thomanerchor*.
- He took office in the middle of the liturgical year, on the first Sunday after Trinity, 30 May 1723.

- Bach wrote *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*, BWV 62, in 1724, his second year as *Thomaskantor*, for the First Sunday of Advent, as part of his chorale cantata cycle.
- Bach led the *Thomanerchor* in the first performance of the cantata on 3 December 1724. Another performance is documented between 1732 and 1735.
- It was performed again in 1736, with an added part for violone in all movements, after the *Thomasschule* had bought an instrument at an auction in 1735.
- Bach's score contains a detailed list of the liturgy of the service on the Advent Sunday.
- Hans-Joachim Schulze argues that Bach may have written it as instruction for a substitute while he was absent from Leipzig that day; he had to travel to Dresden to receive the title Hofcompositur (Court composer) from the Elector of Saxony, Frederick Augustus II, on Saturday 1 December 1736, giving an organ concert at the Hofkirche's new Silbermann organ.
- Bach's successor Johann Friedrich Doles performed the cantata after Bach's death.
- Bach structured the cantata in six movements, beginning with a chorale fantasia, followed by a series of alternating arias and recitatives, and concluded by a chorale.
- He scored it for four vocal soloists (soprano (S), alto (A), tenor (T) and bass (B)), and a Baroque instrumental ensemble of horn (Co), only to support the chorale melody, two oboes (Ob), two violin parts (Vl), a viola part (Va), and basso continuo (Bc).
- The duration is given as 22 minutes.

Movements of *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*

No.	Title	Text	Type	Vocal	Winds	Strings	Key	Time
1	Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland	Luther	Chorale fantasia	SATB	Co 2Ob	2VI Va	B minor	$\frac{8}{4}$
2	Bewundert, o Menschen, dies große Geheimnis	anon.	Aria	T	2Ob	2VI Va	G major	$\frac{3}{8}$
3	So geht aus Gottes Herrlichkeit und Thron	anon.	Recitative	B				C
4	Streite, siege, starker Held!	anon.	Aria	B		2VI 2Va	D major	C
5	Wir ehren diese Herrlichkeit	anon.	Recitative duet	S A		2VI Va		C
6	Lob sei Gott dem Vater ton	Luther	Chorale	SATB	Co 2Ob	2VI Va	B minor	C

Luther's Words and Paraphrase

1. Saviour of the nations, come,
Now made known the Virgin's Son;
To the wond'r of all the earth
God ordained Him such a birth.

V. 1 Choral fantasia

2. Not of man's blood, nor of flesh,
Only of the Spirit blest,
Is God's Word true Man become,
Fruit from woman's body sprung.

Vv. 2-3 Tenor Aria

3. Though her womb the Child contained,
Yet the Virgin pure remained;
By this token forth was shown:
God was there upon His throne.

4. He went from His chamber fair,
From His kingly hall so pure,
God by nature, man by grace,
On His way to run with haste.

Vv. 4-5 Bass Recitative

5. From the Father forth He came,
And returned unto the same.
Down to hell did He descend;
Back then to God's throne He went.

6. Thou the Father's equal art:
Vict'ry in Thy flesh impart,
That Thy strength divine, O Lord,
Healing to our flesh afford.

V. 6 Bass Aria

7. Shines Thy manger bright and clear,
Night gives forth a new light there,
Darkness cannot come therein,
Faith doth in that light remain.

V. 7 Soprano and Alto Recitative

8. Praise to God the Father b' done,
Praise to God His only Son,
Praise to God the Holy Ghost,
Now and ever, Lord of Hosts.

V. 8 Choral

Performance

Bach Cantatas pilgrimage / John Eliot Gardiner

- On Christmas Day 1999 a unique celebration of the new Millennium began in the Herderkirche in Weimar, Germany: the Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists under the direction of Sir John Eliot Gardiner set out to perform all of Johann Sebastian Bach's surviving church cantatas in the course of the year 2000, the 250th anniversary of Bach's death.
- The cantatas were performed on the liturgical feasts for which they were composed, in a year-long musical pilgrimage encompassing some of the most beautiful churches throughout Europe (including many where Bach himself performed) and culminating in three concerts in New York over the Christmas festivities at the end of the millennial year

NUN KOMM DER HEIDEN HEILAND

Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland,
Now come, saviour of the gentiles,
Der Jungfrauen Kind erkannt,
recognised as the child of the Virgin,
Des sich wundert alle Welt,
at whom all the world is amazed,
Gott solch Geburt ihm bestellt.
that God decrees such a birth for him.

- 1. Chorus [S, A, T, B]
- Corno col Soprano, Oboe I/II, Violino I/II, Viola, Continuo

- The music opens with an instrumental ritornello, beginning with a quote of the first (and last) line of the tune in the continuo, and ending with a slightly different quote in the oboes.
- The soprano sings the *cantus firmus* in long notes, while the lower voices prepare each entry in imitation, using *a motif from the tune for the first line, an inverted motif from the tune for the second line, motifs from the ritornello in the third line and an expanded reprise of the first line for the last.*
- *Affekt*: Joyful expectation, regal yet restrained.
- Dürr suggested that Bach was inspired to this festive setting in 6/4 time by the Gospel reading about the entry into Jerusalem.

Bewundert, o Menschen, dies große Geheimnis:

Admire, mankind, this great mystery,

Der höchste Beherrscher erscheint der Welt.

the highest ruler appears to the world.

Hier werden die Schätze des Himmels entdeckt,

Here the treasures of heaven are revealed,

Hier wird uns ein göttliches Manna bestellt,

here a divine manna is presented to us,

O Wunder! die Keuschheit wird gar nicht beflecket.

O marvel! Chastity can not be defiled.

- 2. Aria [Tenor]
- Oboe I/II, Violino I/II, Viola, Continuo

*2. Not of man's blood, nor of flesh,
Only of the Spirit blest,
Is God's Word true Man become,
Fruit from woman's body sprung.*

*3. Though her womb the Child contained,
Yet the Virgin pure remained;
By this token forth was shown:
God was there upon His throne.*

- The first aria, for tenor, deals with the mystery of the birth of Jesus: "*Bewundert, o Menschen, dies große Geheimnis: der höchste Beherrscher erscheint der Welt*".
- Set in a major key in Siciliano rhythm, with string accompaniment doubled in tutti sections by the oboes, the music was described by Dürr as "joyfully soaring".
- NB: the dance character of the aria, between *passepied* and *minuet* which begins with 24 measures of instrumental music.
- A meditative, inward aria inviting listeners to contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation.
- The tenor line is lyrical, gently shaped, expressing *awe* rather than *exuberance*.
- The violin obbligato is intricate but never virtuosic for its own sake—its flowing lines illustrate the *unfathomable* yet *intimate* nature of the mystery.
- Harmonic turns subtly highlight theological points, particularly the divine willingness to taking human form.

So geht aus Gottes Herrlichkeit und Thron

Thus from God's glory and throne

Sein eingeborner Sohn.

goes forth his only begotten son.

Der Held aus Juda bricht herein,

The hero from Judah descends among us

Den Weg mit Freudigkeit zu laufen

to run his course with joy

Und uns Gefallne zu erkaufen.

and to redeem us who are fallen.

O heller Glanz, o wunderbarer Segensschein!

O bright splendour, o wonderful light of bliss!

- 3. Recitative [Bass]
- Continuo

*4. He went from His chamber fair,
From His kingly hall so pure,
God by nature, man by grace,
On His way to run with haste.*

*5. From the Father forth He came,
And returned unto the same.
Down to hell did He descend;
Back then to God's throne He went.*

- A secco recitative for bass expresses: "So geht aus Gottes Herrlichkeit und Thron sein eingeborner Sohn".
- The bass, often Bach's "vox Christi," evokes the divine authority behind Christ's descent.
- The text compresses the narrative of salvation: from God's throne to human lowliness.
- Sparse continuo writing underscores the radical humility of Christ's entrance into the world.

Streite, siege, starker Held!

Fight, conquer, strong hero!

Sei vor uns im Fleische kräftig!

be mighty for us in the flesh!

Sei geschäftig,

Be zealous

Das Vermögen in uns Schwachen

Stark zu machen!

with us in our weakness to make our ability strong.

- 4. Aria [Bass]
- Violino I/II, Viola all' unisono, Continuo

6. Thou the Father's equal art:

Vict'ry in Thy flesh impart,

That Thy strength divine, O Lord,

Healing to our flesh afford.

- One of the cantata's highlights: a vigorous, martial aria portraying Christ as the victorious warrior who conquers sin and death.
- Musical imagery: Rapid, assertive string figures evoke battle: (a) strong rhythmic profiles and (b) bold harmonic moves underline strength and decisive action.
- In great contrast to the first aria, the second one, for bass, is focused on fight: "*Streite, siege, starker Held!*".
- The military aspect was introduced by the librettist, who transformed Luther's address of Jesus as "equal to the Father" into calling a strong hero.
- Elements of "rolling passages" in the voice and fanfare-like instrumental unison passages are typical for the era's "arias with heroic gesture".

Wir ehren diese Herrlichkeit
We honour this glory
Und nahen nun zu deiner Krippen
and now draw near to your crib
Und preisen mit erfreuten Lippen,
and praise with joyful lips
Was du uns zubereit';
what you have prepared for us.
Die Dunkelheit verstört' uns nicht
The darkness did not disturb us
Und sahen dein unendlich Licht.
and we saw your unending light.

- 5. Recitative (Duet) [Soprano, Alto]
- Violino I/II, Viola, Continuo

*7. Shines Thy manger bright and clear,
 Night gives forth a new light there,
 Darkness cannot come therein,
 Faith doth in that light remain.*

- The duet recitative of the high voices, "*Wir ehren diese Herrlichkeit und nahen nun zu deiner Krippen*" expresses thanks, intimately accompanied by the strings.
- According to Schulze, modulation into distant keys illustrates the miracle of the birth and the way to the manger, who described the music as otherworldly and luminous.
- This recitative is more expressive, bordering on *arioso*.
- It shifts focus from Christ's work to the believer's response: *reverence, humility, and gratitude*.
- The text balances doctrinal clarity with a personal, devotional tone.
- Bach's lightly ornamented melodic lines enhance the sense of contemplative wonder.

Lob sei Gott, dem Vater, g'ton,
Praise be given to God, the Father,
Lob sei Gott, sein'm eingen Sohn,
Praise be to God, his only Son,
Lob sei Gott, dem Heiligen Geist,
Praise be to God, the Holy Spirit,
Immer und in Ewigkeit!
always and in eternity!

- 6. Chorale [S, A, T, B]
- Corno e Oboe I/II e Violino I col Soprano, Violino II coll'Alto, Viola col Tenore, Continuo
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- The closing chorale of the cantata is a doxology, "*Lob sei Gott, dem Vater, g'ton*" which treats the medieval melody to a four-part setting.
- The final "Amen" – the closing verse 8 of Luther's hymn – expresses longing and confident hope, characteristic of Advent.
- Bach's harmonic choices subtly reinforce the tension between already and not yet—Christ has come, and yet the Church still prays for His coming.