



# BachBeat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



November 2019

[www.bachcantatachoir.org](http://www.bachcantatachoir.org)

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## **2019-20 Season Begins!**

**Sunday, November 17, 2019 at 2:00 pm**

**\*\*\* Harvest and Holiday Market following concert \*\*\***

**Johann Sebastian Bach: *St. John Passion (Part I) BWV 245***

**Antonio Vivaldi: *In exitu Israel***

**Heinrich Schütz: *Herr, auf dich traue ich***

**Johann Sebastian Bach: *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland BWV 61***

Soloists for this concert include: Arwen Myers, Duncan Tuomi, Kevin Helppie, Laura Beckel Thoreson, Leslie Green, Nan Haemer, and Scott Crandall

All Bach Cantata Choir concerts are held at the Rose City Park Presbyterian Church at the corner of NE 44th & Sandy (office address 1907 NE 45th Ave) in Portland, Oregon ([map](#)).

*Admission is free. Free-will offerings gratefully accepted.*

## **Our 15th Season Begins**

Contributors:

Ralph Nelson, John Vergin, Bill Fischer, and Phil Ayers

Welcome to the fifteenth season of the Bach Cantata Choir! The choir marks this milestone by presenting Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. John Passion*, divided into two performances. And we will also be preparing for our return visit to Leipzig in June 2020, where we will take part in the Bach Festival along with 17 other Bach choirs from around the world. (You can join us! See note at the end of this BachBeat.)

Originally performed for a Good Friday vesper service in 1724, Parts I and II of the *St. John Passion* would have been separated by a sermon of perhaps an hour, leading to a very long service indeed. We have chosen to present Part I at the November concert, and Part II on April 5 which is Palm (or Passion) Sunday.

In this edition of the BachBeat, Artistic Director Ralph Nelson discusses Bach's artistic devices, with specific examples that we can listen for in the performance; John Vergin considers Schütz; Phil Ayers reflects on the *St. John Passion*; and Bill Fischer comments on word usages that caught his attention in the Bach.

### **Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)**

The concert begins with Antonio Vivaldi's *In exitu Israel* RV 604. Composed in 1739, this work for SATB chorus and orchestra describes the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. The text is from Psalms 114 and 115, and the pace of the music reflects the urgency with which the Israelites departed.

### **Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672)**

BCC accompanist John Vergin conducts the choir in a motet, *Herr, auf dich traue ich* (SWV 377), by Heinrich

Schütz. John writes:

"Before Bach, there was Schütz. Born exactly 100 years before Bach, he was a towering figure in the music world. One might consider the two composers to be the bookends of the Baroque era. Bach would have been thoroughly acquainted with the music of Schütz and indebted to the earlier master's work (which included three Passions). In this motet, Schütz, with his usual sensitivity to text and nimbleness of style, sways gently between a strong proclamation of trust, and earnest supplication."

### **J.S. Bach (1685-1750)**

Bach composed *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* (Now Come, Savior of the Heathen) BWV 61 in Weimar for the first Sunday in Advent, 1714. The text for the first movement comes from a hymn by Martin Luther. This is followed by a recitative and aria for tenor. Then comes the bass recitative in movement #4, with its text from Revelation 3:20 ("Behold, I stand at the door and knock."). Here Bach uses relentless pizzicato in the strings to depict knocking at the door. The work continues with a soprano aria. It concludes with a chorale which is noticeably shorter than others and includes the familiar "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern" (How beautifully shines the morning star).

Bill Fischer, our resident German scholar, notes the following:

BWV 61 contains an unusually large number of words whose origin is unclear even at the Germanic level (WGSG\*: 4-9).

The ancient ancestors of *Fleisch* and *flesh*, some of whose cousins in other Germanic languages mean 'pork' or 'bacon,' may once have meant 'cut-off piece of meat,' and thus have come from an even older and more general root that meant 'to split or rip off something,' as in English *flay*.

*Blut* and *blood* appear to be linked with German *blühen* and *Blume* and the equivalent English words (verbs and nouns) *blossom* and *bloom*. The shared notion was to 'burst forth,' whether from a bud or a wound. The correspondence of blossoms and Christ's wounds has been expressed by not a few religious poets and artists of many languages, who until recent centuries could not have known that the terms of the metaphor actually had – but only in Germanic languages – an ancient linguistic link. Luther's Rose, the symbolic seal of Lutheranism, incorporates that motif and metaphor.

Among the mysterious words in our cantata, there is, above all, *Heide*, 'heathen' (WGSG\*:126-31). Many speakers of German will explain it simply as "person from the heath," meaning the wasteland (*Heide*) which was outside the settled areas of north-central Europe and thus only later Christianized. But still earlier, starting in the fourth century, the southeastern part of the Germanic-speaking territory, in which Gothic was spoken, was Christianized by Greek-speaking missionaries. They created or adopted the Gothic word *haiþnō*, 'heathen.' The word may have come from Gothic *haiþi* (German *Heide*, English *heath*) or their own Greek *tà ethné* (as in *ethnic*), whose basic meaning is 'the people,' but which in New Testament contexts meant 'Gentiles' and, most often, 'Greeks.'

There are two oddities here. Those Greek missionaries saw themselves as the new Chosen People; others now were the 'Gentiles,' 'heathens,' 'non-believers.' Moreover, we cannot quite be certain who the 'Heiden'-'heathens' in Luther's and Bach's core cultural environments were. For several centuries there had been no organized heathen / pagan peoples, even in that central-eastern part of northern Europe. There is some complex evidence to allow the hesitant suggestion that the 'heathens' or 'non-believers' of Luther's chorale and Bach's cantata "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland" were, so to speak, neo-heathens: those in the Renaissance and Enlightenment who based their Christianity on reason rather than faith.

\*WGSG: *When God Sang German*. Dr. William B. Fischer is Professor of German, Emeritus, Department of World Languages & Literatures, Portland State University. He sings bass in the Bach Cantata Choir.

### **J.S. Bach (1685-1750)**

Bach composed the *St. John Passion* (BWV 245) in Leipzig for Good Friday, 1724. Bach revised the work at least three more times during his career, either for artistic or logistical reasons, and he had yet another version in progress although it was never performed during his lifetime. For this concert we will sing the 1740 version.

The *St. John Passion* features especially beautiful arias, as described below. But many in our audience look forward to the chorales. In Bach's time, the congregation in Leipzig would have known most of the chorales as hymns and they would have expected to sing along. Our Portland audience also will be invited to join us on certain of the chorales, as indicated in the program.

Ralph Nelson, Artistic Director, offers his thoughts on the *St. John Passion*:

In the summer of 2008, I participated in the conducting masterclass under the direction of Helmuth Rilling at the Oregon Bach Festival – and the *St. John Passion* was the primary focus of our studies. Rilling, one of the greatest conductors of Bach's music, was a master “detective” who enlightened us to all the little “tricks” that are found in the score. Some of these are described below.

Part I deals mainly with three events: the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane; his “trial” before the chief priest at the house of the chief priest; and the denial of Christ by Peter in the garden outside the chief priest’s house.

The opening chorus is a very dramatic work in which the chorus pleads and prays, “Herr” (Lord). But the movement begins with the low strings (the bass punctuating each quarter note – possibly representing the nailing of Christ to the cross) and then “piercing” notes from the oboes and flutes. Later Bach will use these piercing notes again to accompany the great “Crucify” choruses in Part II. In essence, he is foreshadowing the events to come. (Stylistically, Bach is also ahead of his time here; 150 years later, Wagner would commonly use motifs like this throughout his operas.) After the opening chorus, the Evangelist as narrator tells us that Jesus was in the garden and they came to arrest him. Now the chorus changes from commentary to being the actual soldiers.

Throughout Part I, listen especially to how the tenor will skillfully adjust the tempi and dynamics of the recitatives to give greater meaning to the text. Bach carefully chose every note for a reason – and always that reason is to represent and emphasize the text – so please read along in the program!

The arias in this section require a special look. The first one, for alto “Von den Stricken” (From the Shackles) is sung after Jesus is bound and taken to Caiaphas. Bach loved to “paint” pictures in the score – and here is one of them. In this aria, almost every measure ties over to the next one (beat 3 is tied to beat 1) – hence the score looks like it has “ropes” or “shackles” throughout. In the aria for soprano “Ich folge dir” (I Follow You) – there are two flutes, but they play the same line. Why? This is because in the previous recitative, the text says, “Simon Peter followed Jesus with another disciple.” The flutes then take us out of the valley and up into the city – and in their line we can see little hills and mountains, and occasionally some little leaps which are the physical steps.

One of the most dramatic events in Part I is the denial by Peter. Peter is asked three times if he knows Jesus – first by a maid, then by the chorus, and finally by another servant. After the third denial, Bach has this little motif in the cello part:



It is the crowing of the cock, and Bach literally draws the rooster’s comb in the music! Then Bach has an extended “weeping” recitative for the Evangelist on the text “and he went out and wept bitterly.” This text is not part of the Gospel of John – but Bach has added it from the Gospel of Matthew to add to the dramatic effect.

The tenor then sings a magnificent aria “Ach, mein Sinn” (Oh, My Soul). Part I ends with a chorale; the same chorale tune, with different words, will be used to start Part II.

Choir member Phil Ayers also was struck by the tenor aria when he first heard it. He writes:

When I was in music school as a young person with little knowledge of Bach’s Passions, I came across a recording of excerpts of Bach’s *St. John Passion*. It was sung in an English translation, and the “purist” student in me felt strongly that it ought to be in the original German! The recording had in it the recitative of Peter’s denial: “Then did Peter think upon the words of Jesus; and he went forth and wept bitterly.” The rendition by Peter Pears as the Evangelist was stunningly moving [English notwithstanding] and I was hooked forever.

Later I bought a recording of the Passion which was sung in German; still, that recitative remained beautifully moving, as it soars dramatically and resolves (“...und weinete bitterlich...), leading into the following tenor aria, “Ach, mein Sinn” (Ah, my soul). I’ve listened to the Passion over and over, often on Good Friday, and it has become a spiritual practice.

Bill Fischer adds his observations:

The *John Passion*, about as serious a musical work as there can be, begins with a multiple pun on *Herr*, 'Lord', and three other words etymologically related to it (\*WGSG: 81-87, see note below). The quadruple pun defies translation into English:

*Herr*, unser *Herrscher*, dessen Ruhm  
In allen Landen *herrlich* ist!  
Zeig uns durch deine Passion,  
Daß du, der wahre Gottessohn,  
Zu aller Zeit,  
Auch in der größten Niedrigkeit,  
*Verherrlicht* worden bist!

*Lord*, our *ruler*, Whose fame  
In every land is *glorious*!  
Show us, through Your passion,  
That You, the true Son of God,  
Through all time,  
Even in the greatest humiliation,  
Have become *transfigured*! [better: *glorified*]

The author of this first chorale of the *John Passion* is unknown, but we probably have Martin Luther to thank for the pun. The opening of the chorale echoes Psalm 8:1 (German 8:2):

Luther's German:  
*Herr*, unser *Herrscher*, wie *herrlich* ist dein Name in  
allen Landen, da man dir danket im Himmel!

King James English:  
O *Lord* our *Lord*, how *excellent* is thy name in all the  
earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.

While the initial pun of *Herr* / *Herrscher* is present in the Latin of Psalm 8 (*Domine* / *Dominator* or *Domine* / *Dominus*), as it is in the English (*Lord* / *our Lord*), it is not there in the Greek or Hebrew which Luther was also consulting as he translated, sometimes with a little help from his friends. The next pun is all Luther's: *herrlich*, 'excellent;' it is not there in the Latin, Greek and Hebrew of the Psalm. The final pun of the chorale, *verherrlichen*, 'glorify, magnify,' is not in Luther's Psalm 8, nor does *verherrlichen* appear elsewhere in Luther.

Puns come in various kinds. Some connect words that have no other relation to each other than their sound (*pair* / *pare* / *pear*) or even spelling (*bear*, the animal / *bear*, 'to carry'). But some other puns are based on shared origins, like *Herr*, *Herrscher*, *herrlich*, and *verherrlichen*. The Proto-Germanic root is \**heriro*, meaning 'older [and thus wiser] man.' Bach could not have known the etymological details of *Herr* and its punning cousins, though by the eighteenth century some philologists were speculating about an origin of languages that was not just a rehash of the story of the Tower of Babel. But in any case – and this is why the linguistic discussion here is of greater importance to understanding Bach – the Baroque mind both relished puns (see Shakespeare, Wm., and Donne, John) and also interpreted at least some of them as evidence that God, the source of *logos* ('word,' 'order,' 'structure'), has left His signs of deeper meaning in human language.

\*WGSG: *When God Sang German*.

## Harvest and Holiday Market

After the concert, please join us downstairs in the Fellowship Hall for our Harvest and Holiday Market. Choir members and friends have baked, painted, crocheted, or otherwise created many gift items that may be just right for you or someone on your list.

## Bach Festival Leipzig 2020

We are excited to return to Leipzig in June 2020 to participate in the annual BachFest Leipzig. We are among 18 choirs from around the world who are coming together to perform Bach's chorale cantatas during this 10-day festival. Later this season we will perform the three chorale cantatas which we have been asked to prepare.

The choir tour (June 11-20, 2020) will begin in Berlin, proceed to Leipzig for 3-4 days, and conclude in Prague. We have room for more non-singing "groupies" on this tour. Tour cost (exclusive of airfare) is \$3500 per person. (Note: You must additionally provide your own airfare and meet the group in Berlin on June 11, 2020. Price includes all hotels (double occupancy), all ground transportation and 1-2 meals per day. Price also includes tickets to the choir's performance at the Leipzig Bach Fest, but does not include tickets to other Leipzig Bach Festival events – these must be purchased separately. If you are interested in joining us, please email the choir at [info@bachcantatachoir.org](mailto:info@bachcantatachoir.org).

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Thank you!

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## Bach Cantata Choir

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## Recommended Reading

Dr. William B. Fischer is the author of *When God Sang German: Etymological Essays about the Language of Bach's Sacred Music*. Dr. Fischer is graciously donating the proceeds from each book to the Bach Cantata Choir. The books are available from Amazon, which gives the choir a small percentage. But the choir receives 100% from the sale of the author's copies that Dr. Fischer has donated for purchase at our concerts.

## Concert Notes

### Admission:

- Tickets are not required at this concert. A free-will offering will be taken.

### Parking:

- The church's parking lot is very small and fills up quickly. Please allow time to find on-street parking.
- Do not park in the Grocery Outlet lot!

### Accessibility:

- The church has an elevator accessible from its parking lot, facing Sandy Blvd.

The Bach Cantata Choir's mission is to sing the entire set of cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach over a period of 30 years.

The Bach Cantata Choir is a legally organized non-profit corporation under Oregon law, and is a registered 501(c)(3) corporation with the IRS. Donations to the choir are tax-deductible to the extent provided by law and regulation.

The *BachBeat* newsletter is published cyclically by the Bach Cantata Choir.

Emily Rampton, Editor

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