

## Bach: Ein Feste Burg

- is a church or sacred cantata;
- a vocal composition with an instrumental accompaniment;
- minimum orchestra would be strings plus continuo (including either harpsichord or more often, organ);
- addition of oboes, bassoons, trumpets and timpani (and more rarely, flutes and horns) as required;
- several movements (separate sections) - typically five to ten;
- choruses (for choir and orchestra) plus arias, recitatives and duets / trios for solo voices;
- and additionally a chorale (sometimes more than one) if composed for the German, Lutheran church;
- the congregation would join in the singing of the chorale(s) . . . this was an important part of worship in the Lutheran church;
- Bach composed over 300 cantatas for Sunday services and church holidays (of which almost 200 have survived).

- `Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott` was composed in Leipzig for performance on Reformation Day (31<sup>st</sup> October) some time between 1727 and 1731;
- it is a chorale cantata, based on Martin Luther`s chorale of the same name;
- a chorale cantata is based substantially around the text (in this case, four verses) and the melody of a particular chorale;
- there are eight movements in `Ein feste Burg` . . . the chorale melody and the four verses of the text are used in movements 1, 2, 5 and 8;

**1. Chorus:** Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott (verse 1 of the chorale).

**2. Aria and duet** (bass and soprano): Alles, was von Gott geboren (verse 2 of the chorale `Mit unsrer Macht` sung by the soprano).

**3. Recitative and arioso** (bass): Erwäge doch, Kind Gottes.

**4. Aria** (soprano): Komm in mein Herzenshaus.

**5. Chorale:** Und wenn die Welt voll Teufel wär (verse 3 of the chorale sung by the whole choir in octaves, in a 6/8 version - the lines of text separated by orchestral episodes).

**6. Recitative and arioso** (tenor): So stehe denn bei Christi blutgefärbten Fahne.

**7. Duetto** (alto, tenor): Wie selig sind doch die, die Gott im Munde tragen.

**8. Chorale:** Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn (verse 4 of the chorale in its original form - a closing movement for all the musicians and congregation).

### Movement 1: D major

- is a chorale fantasia / motet chorus;
- the nine lines of the chorale are introduced in sequence;
- with the original text;
- and modified (but easily recognisable) versions of the chorale melody;
- each of the nine lines is used fugally and is passed between the voices of the choir in a contrapuntal (polyphonic) texture of great complexity and skill;
- lines 1 and 2 are introduced together;
- the chorale melody for lines 3 and 4 is the same as the first two lines and Bach repeats the same music with the different text;
- lines 5 to 9 of the chorale are introduced one line at a time;

- for each new line, Bach begins with a single voice and builds up one part at time in the manner of a fugal exposition;
- each line of the chorale ends with a tutti (briefly homophonic) cadence, before the next line is introduced by a single voice;
- for each line of the chorale, the 1<sup>st</sup> trumpet and oboes play the melody in long notes in canon with the organ pedal and double basses (in the style of a cantus firmus) after it has been passed through all four voices of the choir;
- the trumpets and timpani also add some (rather clumsy) fanfare figures, added by Bach`s second son Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (perhaps at his father`s request, but unfortunately not in his father`s style);
- sometimes the trumpets and timpani are omitted in performance, although they do brighten the timbre and contribute to a sense of grandeur and rejoicing.

### **Movement 2: D major**

- a concerto grosso style ritornello figure in the unison upper strings plus continuo binds the movement together musically;
- the bass soloist has a technically demanding part;
- with fast scale runs and wide leaps;
- long melismatic passages;
- tonic and dominant keys - with brief departures to G major and E minor;
- soprano and oboe have ornamented versions of the chorale theme;
- the soprano uses the second verse of the chorale text;
- it is unclear whether soprano and oboe are actually intended to be performed together, as there are frequent differences of detail which makes for some rather interesting heterophony;
- contrasting material in the bass vocal part to `accompany` lines 5 to 8 of the (soprano) chorale;
- with frequent modulation to related keys;
- a return to the opening material in both voices (line 9 of the chorale is the same as lines 2 and 4);
- gives a ternary feel to the movement.

### **Movement 8: D major**

- the finale, closing chorale - *Schlusschoral*;
- an essential element in (nearly) all Baroque Lutheran cantatas;
- the melody which has dominated the work is now delivered in its original, undecorated form bringing unity and conclusion to the piece;
- and performed by the full complement of musicians and congregation in a unified act of worship (except the trumpets and timpani which cannot play the full range of notes required and who will therefore presumably sneak off to the nearest pub . . . with apologies for the stereotyping);
- notice how the short, unbalanced phrases in lines 5 to 8 of the chorale, with their uncertain tonality, contrast with the confidence of the regular two bar phrases and settled tonic - dominant tonality of the beginning and end.