Bach’s Motets for Double Chorus

Ich lasse dich nicht BWV Anh. 159
Jauchzet dem Herrn, alle Welt BWV Anh. 160 (Telemann/Bach)
Der Gerechte kommt um (Kuhnau/Bach)
Fürchte dich nicht BWV 228
Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf BWV 226
Komm, Jesu, komm BWV 229
Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied BWV 225
J.S. Bach’s first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, estimated in 1802 that “eight to ten” motets (in the purest style, without independent instruments) by Bach were “still extant.” Sadly, his estimate was too high. Only five of undisputed authenticity have survived: Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied; Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf; Jesu, meine Freude; Fürchte dich nicht; and Komm, Jesu, komm, BWV 225-29 respectively. The authorship of the sixth motet usually ascribed to Bach, Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden, has come under much scrutiny. However, recent authentications of additional motets have led to the expansion of this category of stunningly complex and intricate choral compositions by Bach.

More than any other classification of Johann Sebastian Bach’s works, the motets present enormous problems relating to their identification, authentication, performance practice, and definition. Johann Gottfried Walther (1684-1748) published the following definition for “motet” in his Musicalisches Lexicon (Leipzig, 1732):

“Motetto, plural Motetti [Italian] Motet, plural Motets [French]. Others write: Motteto; still others, Moteto; Latin: Motetttus or Mottetus, Motetus, Motectum, Moteta, etc. is properly a musical composition written on a biblical Spruch, just to be sung without instruments (basso continuo excepting), richly ornamented with Fugen and Imitationibus. But the vocal parts can be taken by and strengthened with various instruments. Foreigners nowadays extend the meaning of this term Motetto to a sacred composition whose text is in Latin, consisting of arias and recitatives, and to which various instruments are supplied, with a parten melodies by turn; as to be seen, among others, in the first opus of Gio. Batt. Allegri.”

Walther and Bach were colleagues. In fact, they were cousins. Bach knew Walther’s definition, no doubt, as he was a sales agent for Walther’s dictionary. While the definition is reasonably straightforward, Bach’s use of the term was very specific and at the same time somewhat contradictory. In autograph sources, he ascribed the title “motet” to only six of his own works, and to four works by other composers. Of the six compositions by Bach, two make use of purely biblical texts, one of a chorale text only, and three of a combination of the two. Yet another area of muddled definition is that of the function of instruments in the motets. Johann Mattheson (1681-1764) clarified Walther’s position on this in 1739:

“The earlier motets consisted of fugues or fugal sections, without instruments, without basso continuo; though in recent times one admits not only basso continuo, but also has that which the voices sing doubled by sundry instruments to play along, and thinks it proper. But the players play not a single note more than, different from, or less than the singers, which is an essential condition of motets.”

Bach’s use of the term is more inclusive. Among the authenticated autograph motets, three are compositions without independent instruments, one with partly independent instruments (O Jesu Christ, mein’s Lebens Licht BWV 118), and two with completely independent instruments (one of which is Bach’s transcription of Pergolesi’s Stabat Mater, which includes an added and quite florid viola part).

Walther’s definition, although somewhat indecisive regarding the use of doubling instruments, nonetheless clearly states one characteristic: Motets were accompanied by basso continuo (organ and a melodic bass instrument). But, in searching for a final word regarding instrumental accompaniment, even the surviving parts to Bach’s motets are inconclusive: while those of Der Geist hilft clearly specify two antiphonal groups of doubling instruments (strings for one choir and winds for the other), there are no surviving instrumental parts at all for Singet dem Herrn, even though a complete set of vocal performing parts exists.

The use of doubling instruments was a common practice in choral works from both the Renaissance and Baroque eras. In larger works (cantatas, passions, masses, etc.) it is rare to find vocal (choral) passages that are not doubled by instruments. And Bach’s choice to use string instruments to double one of the two choruses in Der Geist hilft and wind instruments to double the second chorus can be traced back to the Venetian “poly-choral” style of groups of voices and instruments of different colors being positioned antiphonally, the contrasting sonorities of the instruments contributing to the perception of “separation” between the various choirs.

Bach’s compositions in this genre basically adhere to the first part of Walther’s definition (“richly ornamented with Fugen and Imitationibus”), but they are by no means consistent in their use of compositional gestures or even form. Yet symmetry, exceptionally brilliant polyphony, effective word underlay, and the use of chorales and “aria” style are all prominent.

While speculation and indeed conclusions regarding Bach’s use of only one singer to a part in his cantatas have become widely accepted, an equally popular belief is that the motets presented an opportunity for all of Bach’s reasonably talented singers to take part. This is ironic since the part writing is often much more complex and difficult than that found in the bulk of the cantatas. But, as it is a common supposition that motets were generally performed as funeral music (although only Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf contains a specific autograph dedication, for the funeral of J. H. Ernesti, rector of the Thomasschule, in October 1727), the explanation is that the motets were used to train the singers, and were therefore in their repertory, having benefited from much more rehearsal than could ever be allotted to the hurried weekly preparations of figured ensemble music in the cantatas.

Of course, modern day performers of Bach’s vocal music must not fail to revisit and scrutinize recent scholarship regarding the number of singers to employ. There have been two fairly recent discourses on the subject: one quite based on scholarship and the other a little less so. Joshua Rifkin’s theory that most Baroque “choral” music was performed by one singer per part may be difficult to dispute, but it is not without loopholes. Robert L. Marshall addressed Rifkin’s revelation by using the same evidence referenced by Rifkin to prove that Bach had, or used to have, or would have liked to have had at least three singers to a part, if not four being the most desirable number. Some of the principal problematic areas in Rifkin’s hypothesis are these: Bach’s letter of 1730—sent to the Leipzig town council as a complaint about the insufficiency of the musical forces that were available to him—irrefutably states that “proper performance” of church music requires “Concertists and Ripienists.” In 17th- and 18th-century art works, several singers are sometimes depicted singing from one part or stand; Rifkin himself proves that the St. John Passion (a four-part work) was performed by eight singers; and, lastly, it is important to note that Handel was conducting performances with indeed many singers to a part at the same time Bach was in Leipzig. Bach was undoubtedly well informed of other national styles of music and performance practice.

Bach gave us enough of an answer to the dilemma, not only in his letter of 1730, but also in the legacy of concerto style handed down to him and from him on to us. Without a doubt, the use of soli versus tutti—concertists and ripienists—was and is the model. Bach was certainly willing to double and even triple the number of musicians per part, if only his budgets would allow. Similarly, as proven by the existence of parts for strings and winds
complicated story here, but the short version is that the work’s authorship, two have been graced by the favor of validation in recent years: Ich lasse dich nicht, du segnest mich denn and Jauchzet dem Herrn, alle Welt, at least part of it. When Ich lasse dich nicht was first published in 1802, its composer was designated as J.S. Bach. It had been in the repertory of the Leipzig Kantorei, and its authorship had been unquestioned. But in the 1820s, Johann Friedrich Naus, the editor of a new edition of the work, speculated that the real composer had been Johann Christoph Bach (1642-1703), Sebastian’s granduncle. Recent scholarship by Daniel R. Melamed has proven Naus’ speculation to be unfounded, and a manuscript containing an earlier version of the work (without the final chorale) has been found, the first measures of which are indisputably in the hand of J.S. Bach himself. (The rest of this manuscript is in the hand of Philipp David Kräuter, a pupil of Bach’s in Weimar during 1712-13.) It is the second of the work’s three sections—a contrapuntal episode on biblical text set beneath a chorale verse in the soprano—that is most easily identified, in stylistic and compositional terms, as authentic. While this device was by no means unique to Bach’s works, the complexity of the fugal polyphony and its harmony is consistent with similar sections of the fully authenticated motets.

Ich lasse dich nicht, du segnest mich denn, mein Jesu.

(Paraphrase of Genesis 32: second half of verse 27)

Weil du mein Gott und Vater bist,
Dein Kind wirst du verlassen nicht
Du väterliches Herz.
Ich bin ein armer Erdenkloß,
Auf Erden weiß ich keinen Trost.

(”Worum betrübst du dich, mein Herz,” verse 3: Anonymous)

Choral
Ich dank dir, Christe, Gottes Sohn,
Daß mich solchs erkennen Iaun
Durch dein göttliches Wort;
Verleih mir auch Beständigkeit
Zu meiner Seelen Seligkeit.

Lob, Ehr und Preis sei dir gesagt
Für alle dein erzeigt Wohltat,
Und bitt demütiglich,
Laß mich nicht von deinem Angesicht
Verstoßen werden ewiglich.

(”Worum betrübst du dich, mein Herz,” verses 13–14: Anonymous)

Perhaps the greatest and most famous of Bach’s biographers Philipp Spitta (1841–1894), wrote that the opening movement of Jauchzet dem Herrn, alle Welt had “unmistakable Telemannian characteristics, but also a certain magnificent conception and that sonority and imposing command of part writing … that one encounters only in Bach.” He was very much on target, even considering all that twentieth-century musicology has gleaned from the available sources. There is a very long and not too complicated story here, but the short version is that the work’s first movement, originally by Telemann, was arranged by Bach—“improved” is a better word—so that what was once a four-part motet is now a double-chorus. The second section is original Bach, or more correctly transcribed Bach: it is nearly identical to material in one of Bach’s cantatas (BWV 28). And the final section, while clearly not Bach, is probably either more Telemann (perhaps from a Christmas cantata) or possibly a movement added by Bach’s Leipzig successor, Johann Gottlob Harrer (1703-1755).

Jauchzet dem Herrn, alle Welt, dienet dem Herrn mit Freuden!
Kommet vor sein Angesicht mit Frohlocken, Alleluja.

(Psalm 100:1-2)

Choral
Sei Lob und Preis mit Ehren,
Gott Vater, Sohn und Heiliger Geist,
Der wolt in uns vermehren,
Was er aus Gnaden uns verheißt,
Daß wir ihm fest vertrauen,
Gänzlich verlaß’n auf ihn,
Von Herzen auf ihn bauen,
Daß uns’r Herz, Mut und Sinn
Ihm tröstlich soll’nn anhangen,
Drauf singen wir zur Stund:
Amen, wir werd’ns erlangen,
Glaub’n wir aus Herzengrund.

(”Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren,” verse 5: Johann Grammann 1487-1541)

Amen. Lob und Ehre und Weisheit und Dank und Preis und Kraft

(Revelation 7:12)

I will not let you go, unless you bless me, my Jesus.

Since you are my God and Father,
you will not forsake a child,
you fatherly heart.
I am a poor clod of earth;
on earth I know no consolation.

To you Jesus, God’s son, be praise,
That from your word I know
What makes blessed forever
In this faith of mine.
I give praise and honour to you
That you have won an eternal salvation for me
Through your death
Lord, may you grant me this salvation
And may I always, always thank you.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with rejoicing, alleluia.

Glory, and praise with honor
be to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!
He will increase in us
what He has promised us out of grace,
so that we trust fast in Him,
abandon ourselves completely to Him,
rely on Him within our hearts,
so that our heart, will, and mind
depend strongly on Him;
therefore we sing at this time:
Amen, we shall succeed,
if we believe from the depths of our hearts.

Amen. Laud, honor, wisdom, thanks, praise, power and might
be to our God from eternity to eternity. Amen.
A fairly common practice in the eighteenth century was to assemble a large work—classified as a pastiche—from individual movements by several composers. One such compilation is *Wer ist der, so von Edom kommt* (Who is this that cometh from Edom), based principally on Carl Heinrich Graun’s passion cantata *Ein Lämmlein geht und trägt die Schuld* (A lambkin goes and bears our guilt). At some point, several movements were added to the work, including one or two by J. S. Bach. It is difficult, even impossible, to prove Bach’s authorship of *Der Gerechte kommt um*, the motet-like movement contained therein. But several factors strongly suggest it: the score was owned, at one time, by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach; the copyist was Bach’s son-in-law and student Johann Christoph Altnickol; and some stylistic and compositional elements point clearly to Bach. This work uses mostly *colla parte* instruments, whose independent material is limited to brief ritornellos complimented by non-thematic obbligato harmonic support, in this case by two oboes. One likely scenario is that Bach added instrumental parts to a motet attributed to his Leipzig predecessor Johann Kuhnau. That Latin text for that work, *Tristis est anima mea*, is a Matins Responsory for Maundy Thursday, and the German text of *Der Gerechte* is a translation of a Matins Responsory for Holy Saturday (also used on Good Friday immediately following the singing of the Passion). While there are indeed many confusing and inconclusive factors regarding its exact source of composition, *Der Gerechte kommt um*—in the form presented on this recording—has enjoyed a long-standing attribution to Bach.

The righteous must die, and there is none whose heart is moved to feel it, and men of great mercy have been taken hence, and no one thinks of it.

For these same righteous have been sent away from evil; they that rightly and well have walked among us, shall then be peaceful, reposing within their chambers.

It is likely that *Fürchte dich nicht* was composed circa 1715 in Weimar. There is much speculation about the mechanism of its composition, suggesting that the final section may have been composed first, and that Bach sought out an additional Biblical text in order to support a full eight voice opening movement. *Fürchte dich nicht* is especially significant in its treatment of the final chorale; it is one of only two works by Bach (or attributed to Bach) that feature unique and rare applications within the motet genre of intensely contrapuntal support of the cantus firmus. Nevertheless, the fugal material is succinct and used economically; note the descending and crossing chromatic motif of the final fugue, notationally representative of the cross. The text of the motif is “I have redeemed thee” (“ich habe dich erlöst”), and it is repeated 33 times (the age of Christ at his death), creating an interesting juxtaposition of the Old Testament text with New Testament symbolism. Another striking aspect of this motet is the strongly homophonic opening section, which uses remarkably short phrase lengths. In fact, the rather monumental adherence to these interchanges between the two choruses certainly emphasizes the insistent and reassuring text. Eventually, at the words “I will strengthen thee” (“ich stärke dich”), a recitative-like proclamation is handed back and forth among various voices until the text “I will uphold thee” (“ich erhalte dich”) presents the opportunity for extremely long note values and melismas. This is broken off by an eight-voice restatement of the opening motif, one that will be used in an abbreviated form to end the motet. The magnificent and fugally supported chorale follows, until the opening and closing text is used as a final punctuation. C.P.E. Bach copied a set of doubling parts for this motet, but interestingly they are scored for two “choirs” of strings, not the more idiomatic scenario of strings versus winds. Another interesting aspect of this work is the use, in those parts, of “untexted” notes for the bass instruments, whose independent material is limited to brief ritornellos complemented by non-thematic obbligato harmonic support, in this case by two oboes. One likely scenario is that Bach added instrumental parts to a motet attributed to his Leipzig predecessor Johann Kuhnau. That Latin text for that work, *Tristis est anima mea*, is a Matins Responsory for Maundy Thursday, and the German text of *Der Gerechte* is a translation of a Matins Responsory for Holy Saturday (also used on Good Friday immediately following the singing of the Passion). While there are indeed many confusing and inconclusive factors regarding its exact source of composition, *Der Gerechte kommt um*—in the form presented on this recording—has enjoyed a long-standing attribution to Bach.

Do not fear, I am with you; do not recoil, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, and help you as well, I sustain you with the right hand of my righteousness.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are Mine.
It is the surviving instrumental parts for *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf* that clearly indicate Bach’s ascription to the convention of *colla parte* doubling. They were copied out by Johann Ludwig Krebs, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Anna Magdalena Bach (only a few measures), and Johann Sebastian Bach himself. It is also the only motet bearing an autograph dedication, clearly indicating its use at a memorial service. The work is in three sections, followed—or perhaps not to be followed—by a concluding chorale.

In Bach’s own hand, the words *Choral sequitur* appear at the end of his score, as an instruction to his assisting copyists. In the vocal parts, the chorale was copied in the same key as the motet. But the chorale was not put into the accompanying instrumental parts. Since we know Bach always used available instruments to double the singing of chorales, it seems likely that it might have been sung at some other location, perhaps later in the service (away from the instruments) or even at the concluding graveside ceremony.

**Romans 8:26**

*Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf, denn wir wissen nicht, was wir beten sollen, wie sichs gebühret; sondern der Geist selbst vertritt uns aufs beste mit unaussprechlichem Seufzen.*

**Romans 8:27**

*Alla breve*

*Der aber die Herzen forschet, der weiß, was des Geistes Sinn sei; denn er vertritt die Heiligen nach dem, das Gott gefället.*

**(Martin Luther 1483-1546)**

**Choral**

*Du heilige Brunst, süßer Trost,*  
*Nun hilft uns fröhlich und getrost*  
*In dein’m Dienst beständig bleiben,*  
*Die Trübsal uns nicht abtreiben!*  
*O Herr, durch dein Kraft uns bereit*  
*Und stärk des Fleisches Blödigkeit,*  
*Daß wir hier ritterlich ringen,*  
*Durch Tod und Leben zu dir dringen.*  
*Halleluja, halleluja!*

**(Romans 8:26)**

**Choral**

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**Komm, Jesu, komm** makes use of double-chorus, not in a traditionally antiphonal way, but rather as a means to achieve heightened rhetorical expression. The two choirs respond to each other, relate to each other, divide, and combine again, but in an eight-part texture that is rich in both color and

**Alla breve**

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**(Romans 8:27)**

**Komm, Jesu, komm, mein Leib ist müde,**  
*Die Kraft verschwindt je mehr und mehr,*  
*Ich sehne mich nach deinem Friede;*  
*Der saure Weg wird mir zu schwer!*  
*Komm, komm, ich will mich dir ergeben;*  
*Du bist der rechte Weg, die Wahrheit und das Leben.*

**Aria**

*Drum schließ ich mich in deine Hände*  
*Und sage, Welt, zu guter Nacht!*  
*Eilt gleich mein Lebenslauf zu Ende,*  
*Ist doch der Geist wohl angebracht.*  
*Er soll bei seinem Schöpfer schweben,*  
*Weil Jesus ist und bleibt der wahre Weg zum Leben.*

**(Paul Thymich 1656-1694)**

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In 1789, during his visit to Leipzig, Mozart heard the St. Thomas choir perform *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*. He was enthralled by the work and requested a copy of the score. His hand-written note that “a full orchestra had to be added” attests, perhaps, to Mozart’s impression of the extreme difficulty of this, the most splendid of Bach’s motets. Christoph Wolff has compared *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*, with its fast-slow-fast tempo construction, to an instrumental concerto. Indeed, its proportions are grand. The antiphonal aspects echo the greatest Venetian works, and both of the outer movements, in their two-part structure, remind us of some of the most imposing two-part choruses found in the Mass in B Minor, the *Gloria…et in terra pax* and *Sanctus…pleni sunt coeli* couplings. Many attempts have been made to accurately date this work, but Stephen Daw’s hypothesis that it was composed for an official memorial service held for Christiane Eberhardine, the Queen of Poland, in September of 1727 is the most convincing. For that event, held in the University Church, Bach had composed the great *Trauerode* (BWV 198), well known for its somber instrumentation including two violas da gamba and two lutes. But this motet presented the opportunity to present a work of enthralling majesty as a joyous testament to her perceived martyrdom.

- Notes by Jeffrey Thomas

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Sing unto the Lord a new song, and his praise in the congregation of saints. Let Israel rejoice in him that made him. Let the children of Sion be joyful in their King. Let them praise his name in the dance; let them sing praises unto him with the timbrel and harp.

God, take us to Yourself from now on! For without You we can accomplish nothing with all of our belongings. Therefore be our protection and light, and if our hope does not deceive us, You will make it happen in the future. Happy is the person who strictly and tightly abandons himself to You and Your mercy!

As a father has mercy upon his young children: so the Lord does with us poor ones, when we fear Him with pure and childlike hearts. He knows his poor creatures, God knows we are but dust. Just as the grass that is mowed, a flower or a falling leaf, the wind only blows over it, and it is no longer there: So also man passes away, his end is near to him.

Praise the Lord for his mighty acts. Praise him according to his excellent greatness. Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. Hallelujah!
Colla parte Violin I part for Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf in Bach’s autograph