

# The Chorales of Bach's St. Matthew Passion: their Sources and Dramatic Roles

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## Contents

Introduction	2
Melody #1: the "Passion Chorale"	
Erkenne mich, mein Hüter	9
Ich will hier bei dir stehen	11
Befiehl du deine Wege	24
O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden	28
Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden	30
Melody #2	
Herzliebster Jesu	5
Was ist die Ursach aller solcher Plagen?	13
Wie wunderbarlich ist doch diese Strafe	26
Melody #3	
Ich bins, ich sollte büßen	7
Wer hat dich so geschlagen	20
Melodies 4-8	
O Lamm Gottes unschuldig	3
Was mein Gott will, das gscheh allzeit	15
O Mensch, beweine dein Sünde groß	17
Mir hat die Welt trüglich gericht'	19
Bin ich gleich von dir gewichen	22
Jesum laß ich nicht von mir (before 1736)	32

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## Introduction

*Chorales* are hymns of the Lutheran church. They were used in public worship, and in private devotions. Without them, the St. Matthew Passion would be quite unrecognizable to us. As a matter of fact, without chorales nearly half of Bach's music wouldn't exist. They are the focus of so much in Bach, especially in the cantatas and organ music. Clearly, the chorale was very dear to Bach himself. In the St. Matthew Passion, they are second only to Scripture as the unifying element.

Eight chorales are heard in the St. Matthew Passion. One is heard five times, another three, and another twice. All told, chorales punctuate the narrative fifteen times, always in moments of the greatest introspection. We have every indication that Bach chose these chorales himself, as well as their placement in the drama. His purpose was twofold: that we should speak as one voice in response to Scripture, and that we should apply its lessons to our lives.

In this document, the chorales appear in the order that they are heard in the St. Matthew Passion. But in the table of contents page they are grouped by melody.

The churches in Leipzig used a hymnal published in that city called "Geistreicher Liederschatz, oder Leipziger Gesang-Buch" ("Treasury of Spiritual Songs: the Leipzig Hymn Book"), by Johann Friedrich Braun. Each city had its own hymnbook, suited to its particular theology.



## *O Lamm Gottes unschuldig* (*O Lamb of God without guilt*)

O Lamm Got - tes, un - schul - dig  
all - zeit er - fun - den ge - dul - dig, (orch.)

am Stamm des Kreu - zes ge - schlach - tet  
wie - wohl du wa - rest ver - ach - tet. (orch.)

All Sünd hast du ge - tra - gen, (orch.)

sonst müß - ten wir ver - za - gen. (orch.)

Er - barm dich un - ser, o Je - su, o Je - su!

### When is this heard?

This chorale is embedded within the great double chorus that begins the St. Matthew Passion. It was not part of the first performance in 1727, apparently not added until Bach's 1736 revision. Though missing from the original score, it may yet have been sung, as it seems implausible for Bach to have written so complex a work only to discover, after the fact, the musical possibility of overlaying a chorale so thematically relevant as this. The melody is sung by boys,

with ornate double-choir polyphony all about. You will need to listen closely to hear the "cantus firmus" with its phrases separated by elaborate choral interludes.

The opening chorus of the St. Matthew Passion presents the first of its two great themes: lamentation for our sins. The crux of the chorale is this line: "You [O Lamb of God] have carried all sin, otherwise we must despair." This theme is restated in the closing chorus of part 1: "O man, bewail your great sin" ("O Mensch beweine deine Sünde groß"). The word "sin" is heard fourteen times in the St. Matthew Passion, with related words of guilt, fault, heavy burden, transgressions, penance and remorse, need to make atonement, being deserving of punishment and blame, and the weakness of the flesh.

The second theme emanates from the first. In it we hear consoling words of forgiveness and of God's grace, love, salvation, loyal care, acceptance, faithfulness, removal of judgment, refreshment of our souls, lifting us up, helping us not to despair, moderation in chastisement, sacrifice for us, being our advocate and mediator, helping our sins to fall asleep, and of Jesus reaching out his hand to offer redemption, mercy, and rest.

The poem, by Nicolaus Decius, is one of two German texts that Luther substituted for the Latin "Agnus Dei." The other was "Christe, du Lamm Gottes." Occasionally the breviaries of the period called for "the German Agnus Dei," leaving liturgists to choose which one. Unlike that of the Roman rite, the German Agnus Dei had no fixed place in Lutheran worship, sometimes being sung before communion, and at other times during. When during communion, it was more likely to be joined by the whole congregation, rather than chanted by the minister.

## Who wrote it?

*Melody and text:* Nicolaus Decius (1485-1546). Nicolaus a Curia, also known as Nicolaus von Hofe (from the town of Hof), was a monk at the time of the Reformation. He followed Luther and became an evangelical pastor. Decius was a good musician who helped Luther adapt the musical parts of the liturgy from Latin to German. Although Luther loved polyphonic choral music, in church he wanted ordinary people to sing the words themselves, in their own language. Decius is remembered for recasting three parts of the Latin ordinary as German vernacular hymns: the Sanctus, Gloria, and Agnus Dei (which is this chorale).

## Text

English translation by Tobin Schmuck.

O Lamb of God, innocently  
slaughtered on the stem of the cross,  
at all times patiently composed,  
even as you were condemned.  
You have carried all sin,  
otherwise we must despair.  
Have mercy on us, O Jesus!

## Herzliebster Jesu

(Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended?)

Herzliebster Jesu, was hast du verbrochen, daß man ein  
solch scharf Urteil hat gesprochen? Was ist die Schuld, in  
was für Missetaten, bist du geraten?

### When is this heard?

This is the second chorale of the St. Matthew Passion, and the first in a traditional hymn style – in four simple voices. It is also the first to be heard after the story has begun. Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem where he will be crucified. Now this chorale.

That Bach would incorporate a chorale so soon in the Passion reveals its purpose, to include us in the story. Let us visualize the drama as it now begins. Imagine your best friend telling you what Jesus has just told his friends. He is going to a place where he knows that he will be killed. Willingly? How confused might you be? What might you ask in reply – what explanation demand? What might comfort you?

Bach's comfort is heard in this chorale: "Beloved Jesus, Why? What have you done to deserve this?" The disciples would have asked this for sure, though Matthew didn't write it down. So Bach gives us the opportunity to join them in a hymn of their inevitable asking.

This tune is heard three times in the St. Matthew Passion, each to words by one of the most beloved of Lutheran poets, Johann Heermann. He is best known for his "cross and comfort" hymns, of which this is one. You should notice the resolute fullness of Rilling's interpretation. The disciples have a right to ask Jesus the meaning of his troubling words. If they are to follow him into this dangerous situation, they must know why.

### Who wrote it?

*Melody:* Johann Crüger (1598-1662). Crüger was an excellent composer who wrote many well-known chorales, most famously: "Now Thank we All Our God" ("Nun danket alle Gott"). He is also remembered for his editorial contribution to the great hymnbooks of the period. That Bach harmonized this melody three times in the St. Matthew Passion is proof of its timeless beauty.

*Text:* Johann Heermann (1585-1657) was born 100 years before Bach. Five of his older siblings had died, and as a child he fell gravely ill. His mother prayed that if he should recover, she would educate him for the ministry. This she did, though it required her to borrow the tuition. Heermann lived through the devastating Thirty Years War, many accidents, and plagues; he was often made homeless, and more than once nearly lost his life to sabers and bullets. In contemporary publication his poetry was sometimes headed: "Songs of Tears in the time of the persecution and distress of Pious Christians."

The present poem was first published in 1630, in a collection called "Music of a Devotional Heart" ("Devoti Musica Cordis"). In the St. Matthew Passion Bach employs three of its fifteen stanzas, originally published under the banner: "The Cause of the bitter sufferings of Jesus Christ, and consolation from his love and grace, from Augustine." As the title implies, the poet found inspiration in St. Augustine's *Meditations*, with related thoughts from St. Anselm and St. Gregory. And what is that cause of Jesus' bitter suffering? The second stanza has the answer.

## Text

Here follows an 1899 metrical rhyming translation (loosely from the German) by the Englishman, Robert S. Bridges. Three of these stanzas, the most enduring of Heermann's original fifteen, are used in the St. Matthew Passion. The present harmonization sets the first (in red).

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast Thou offended,  
That man to judge Thee hath in hate pretended?  
By foes derided, by Thine own rejected,  
O most afflicted.

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon Thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee.  
'Twas I, Lord, Jesus, I it was denied Thee!  
I crucified Thee.

Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered;  
The slave hath sinned, and the Son hath suffered;  
For man's atonement, while he nothing heedeth,  
God intercedeth.

For me, kind Jesus, was Thy incarnation,  
Thy mortal sorrow, and Thy life's oblation;  
Thy death of anguish and Thy bitter passion,  
For my salvation.

Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay Thee,  
I do adore Thee, and will ever pray Thee,  
Think on Thy pity and Thy love unswerving,  
Not my deserving.

*Ich bins, ich sollte büßen*  
(It is Me, I Should Pay)

Ich bin's, ich soll - te bü - ßen, an Hän - den und an  
Fü - ßen ge - bun - den in der Höll'. Die  
Gei - ßeln und die Ban - den, und was du aus - ge -  
stan - den, das hat ver - die - net mei - ne Seel'.

**When is this heard?**

Jesus and his disciples are seated for the Passover meal. While they are eating, Jesus tells his friends that one of them will betray him. This makes them very sad, and each one asks, “Lord, is it I?” Bach follows their question with this chorale, which begins, “It is I.”

This melody is heard twice in the St. Matthew Passion, both to poetry by Paul Gerhardt. Luther translated the disciple’s questioning of the Lord in these words: “bin ich’s?” (Is it I?). Gerhard reversed the word order for this chorale to: “Ich bins” (It is I). Bach put the two together.

**Who wrote it?**

*Melody:* Heinrich Isaac (1450-1517). This melody, one of the oldest in the St. Matthew Passion, is attributed to Heinrich Isaac, a Franco-Flemish composer who was employed for a time by the Medici family in Florence, and thereafter by the Austrian branch of the House of Habsburg, in Vienna. His most famous composition, “Innsbruck I now must leave thee” was adapted for use as a Lutheran chorale, and Bach harmonized it twice in the St. Matthew Passion.

*Text:* Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676) was one of the most prolific hymnists of the period. Of the sixteen chorale stanzas in the St. Matthew Passion, Gerhardt wrote eight. This includes all six stanzas of the so-called “passion chorale,” as well as the two stanzas of this melody by Heinrich Isaac.

## Text

The present text is the fifth stanza (red below) of sixteen in Paul Gerhardt's "O Welt, sieh hier dein Leben." This poem was first published in Crüger's *Praxis pietatis melica* of 1648. Here are the first five stanzas in translation by the nineteenth century Scottish theologian, John Kelly.

See, world! thy Life assailed;  
On the accurs'd tree nailèd,  
Thy Saviour sinks in death!  
The mighty Prince from Heaven  
Himself hath freely given  
To shame, and blows, and cruel wrath!

Come hither now and ponder,  
'Twill fill thy soul with wonder,  
Blood streams from every pore.  
Through grief whose depth none knoweth,  
From His great heart there floweth  
Sigh after sigh of anguish o'er!

Who is it that afflicts Thee?  
My Saviour, what dejects Thee,  
And causeth all Thy woe?  
Sin Thou committed'st never,  
As we and our seed ever,  
Of deeds of evil nought dost know.

I many times transgressing,  
In number far surpassing  
The sand upon the coast,  
I thus the cause have given,  
That Thou with grief art riven,  
And the afflicted martyr host.

I've done it, and deliver  
Me hand and foot for ever  
Thou justly might'st to hell.  
The mock'ry to Thee offer'd,  
The scourging Thou hast suffer'd,  
My soul it was deserv'd it well.



## Erkenne mich, mein Hüter (My Shepherd, Now Receive Me)



Er - ken - ne mich, mein Hü - ter, mein  
Von dir, Quell al - ler Gü - ter, ist

Hir - te, nimm mich an! Dein Mund hat mich ge -  
mir viel Guts ge - tan.

la - bet mit Milch und sü - ßer Kost, dein Geist hat

mich be - ga - bet mit man - cher Him - mels - lust.

### When is this heard?

This is the fourth chorale to be heard in the work, and the first of five hearings of the "passion chorale." After Jesus has observed the Passover meal with his disciples, they sing a hymn of praise and leave for the Mount of Olives. Along the way, Jesus tells them that when he, the Shepherd, has been smitten, they will flee like sheep. Bach now inserts this chorale. He uses the stanza of text that you find in italicized red, below.

The bright key of four sharps, with few subsequent accidentals, contribute a hopeful and promising outlook.

### Who wrote it?

*Melody:* Hans Leo Hassler (1564-1612). Hassler studied with Andrea Gabrieli at the height of the Venetian polychoral period. Like Bach, he was a famous organist and organ builder. Hassler did not write this as a hymn, but as a sad love song, "Mein G'müt ist mir verwirret," which Johann Crüger simplified and combined with Paul Gerhardt's text.

*Text:* Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676) made a German adaptation of the Latin hymn, "Salve mundi salutare" ("Hail to Thee, Savior of the World") by the 13th century abbot, Arnulf of Leuven. The Latin text praises the parts of Christ's body crucified, with the final stanzas praising his head: "Salve caput cruentatum."

## Text

The following English translation (1830) is by the American Presbyterian minister, J. W. Alexander.

O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed  
down,  
Now scornfully surrounded with thorns, Thine only crown;  
How pale Thou art with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn!  
How does that visage languish, which once was bright as morn!

What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered, was all for sinners' gain;  
Mine, mine was the transgression, but Thine the deadly pain.  
Lo, here I fall, my Savior! 'Tis I deserve Thy place;  
Look on me with Thy favor, vouchsafe to me Thy grace.

Men mock and taunt and jeer Thee, Thou noble countenance,  
Though mighty worlds shall fear Thee and flee before Thy glance.  
How art Thou pale with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn!  
How doth Thy visage languish that once was bright as morn!

Now from Thy cheeks has vanished their color once so fair;  
From Thy red lips is banished the splendor that was there.  
Grim death, with cruel rigor, hath robbed Thee of Thy life;  
Thus Thou hast lost Thy vigor, Thy strength in this sad strife.

My burden in Thy Passion, Lord, Thou hast borne for me,  
For it was my transgression which brought this woe on Thee.  
I cast me down before Thee, wrath were my rightful lot;  
Have mercy, I implore Thee; Redeemer, spurn me not!

What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest friend,  
For this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?  
O make me Thine forever, and should I fainting be,  
Lord, let me never, never outlive my love to Thee.

*My Shepherd, now receive me; my Guardian, own me Thine.  
Great blessings Thou didst give me, O source of gifts divine.  
Thy lips have often fed me with words of truth and love;  
Thy Spirit oft hath led me to heavenly joys above.*

Here I will stand beside Thee, from Thee I will not part;  
O Savior, do not chide me! When breaks Thy loving heart,  
When soul and body languish in death's cold, cruel grasp,  
Then, in Thy deepest anguish, Thee in mine arms I'll clasp.

The joy can never be spoken, above all joys beside,  
When in Thy body broken I thus with safety hide.  
O Lord of Life, desiring Thy glory now to see,  
Beside Thy cross expiring, I'd breathe my soul to Thee.

My Savior, be Thou near me when death is at my door;  
Then let Thy presence cheer me, forsake me nevermore!  
When soul and body languish, oh, leave me not alone,  
But take away mine anguish by virtue of Thine own!

Be Thou my consolation, my shield when I must die;  
Remind me of Thy passion when my last hour draws nigh.  
Mine eyes shall then behold Thee, upon Thy cross shall dwell,  
My heart by faith enfolds Thee. Who dieth thus dies well.

## *Ich will hier bei dir stehen* (Here I Will Stand Beside Thee)

The image shows a musical score for the chorale 'Ich will hier bei dir stehen'. It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a basso continuo line (bass clef). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are: 'Ich will hier bei dir stehen; ver -  
Von dir will ich nicht ge - hen, wenn  
ach - te mich doch nicht! Wenn dein Herz wird er -  
dir dein Her - ze bricht.  
blas - sen im letz - ten To - des - stoß, als - denn will  
ich dich fas - sen in mei - nen Arm und Schoß.'

### When is this heard?

Along the path to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus tells his disciples that he will die, and they will scatter like sheep. Bach then inserts the first hearing of the passion chorale, "Erkenne mich, mein Hüter," in which Christians express gratitude to Jesus for being their Shepherd. A minute later, we now come to this, the second hearing, which is a half step lower, hence more sad.

Between the two, Peter promises that he will never abandon the Lord. Jesus replies that Peter will not only deny Him, but before the rooster crows (within five hours). Peter vigorously objects, vowing that he will die for Jesus before such a thing could happen. The other disciples echo Peter's words.

Bach's response is to insert the present stanza (red text next page), in which all Christians pledge, as did the disciples, never to deny Jesus. As we have noted, this hearing is a half step lower, in the key of three flats, whereas the first had been in four sharps. Chafe suggests that in Bach's musical language, more sharps imply more closeness to God, with more flats, the opposite. Notably, Jesus sings "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" in e-flat minor (six flats implied). So our journey from four sharps to three flats reinforces the narrative.

### Who wrote it?

*Melody:* Hans Leo Hassler (1564-1612)

*Text:* Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676)

Please see "Erkenne mich, mein Hüter" (p. 9) for more information about the composer and poet.

## Text

For the full English translation of the passion chorale, see "Erkenne mich, mein Hüter" (p. 10). Here is the text of the present harmonization.

Here I will stand beside Thee,  
from Thee I will not part;  
O Savior, do not chide me!  
When breaks Thy loving heart,  
When soul and body languish  
in death's cold, cruel grasp,  
Then, in Thy deepest anguish,  
Thee in mine arms I'll clasp.

## Was ist die Ursach aller solcher Plagen? (What is the Cause of This Agony?)

*p sempre*  
 Was ist die Ur-sach al-ler sol-cher Pla-gen? // (recit.)  
*p sempre*  
 Ach! mei-ne Sün-den ha-ben dich ge-schla-gen; // (recit.)  
 ich, ach Herr Je-su, ha-be dies ver-schul-  
 det, was du er-dul-det.  
 det, was du er-dul- - - - det.

## When is this heard?

The sixth chorale is heard in the midst of a tenor recitative about Jesus' sorrow in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is nearly midnight. The little band of friends has just walked a mile or so from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives. There Jesus tells his disciples to stay behind and pray, taking Peter, James, and John with him a few more paces where he tells the three, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death!" They too must now wait and pray.

At this moment Bach's tenor begins to lament – how troubled is Jesus' face, and how pale! How soon all of them will abandon him, the tenor mourns, and how assailed now is Jesus by "the powers of darkness" (Picander's words). In the background, Bach harmonizes this chorale. It is one of the most powerful moments of the St. Matthew Passion.

The chorale, in its perfect timing, may surprise you by its interpretation. Before telling why, we should remember what tradition says of this hour: it was more painful to Jesus than the Roman *flagrum* and cross. The Gospels use language of the utmost agony, and tradition says that he wrestled in the Garden with Satan himself. Matthew recounts how Jesus fell with his face to the ground, and Luke adds that his sweat became as great drops of blood. Today, doctors describe this rare condition as Hematidrosis, caused by intense stress. Leonardo da Vinci writes of soldiers in this state before a battle.

It would be logical to assume that Bach's tenor emotes Jesus' fear of being crucified. Who would not be that afraid? But the chorale says otherwise. He was in distress not of fear, but because for the first time in his life he was experiencing guilt. Beginning in the Garden, says tradition, the sins of the whole world were placed on this sinless man. This feeling of guilt was unfamiliar to him, and an

indescribably sorrowful experience. Read now the second stanza of Johann Heermann's hymn, and you will be moved by Bach's decision to use these words now.

What is the cause of this agony?  
Alas, it is my sins that have smitten you;  
Alas it is I, Lord Jesus, who am to blame  
For this which you endure.

This is the second of three hearings of the "Herzliebster Jesu" chorale. In the first, the disciples had asked Jesus what he did to deserve this punishment. Now we have the answer. By Roman and Jewish law he did nothing, though they will judge him in abuse of their laws. Yet Jesus accepts the punishment for our sins, at what cost to him now in the Garden. By tradition, when the cross was brought to him, Jesus walked toward it, embraced it, and kissed it. Blame for this death should not be foisted on the Jews (as tragically it has) or the Romans, but only on our sins. This is Bach's and Picander's interpretation.

Helmuth Rilling performs this chorale with disquieting contrast. Behind the agitated tenor, the soft chorale is the conscience, our sudden realization of complicity and fault. Paired and plodding eighth notes paint the picture of our sins' heavy load.

### Who wrote it?

*Melody:* Johann Crüger (1598-1662)  
*Text:* Johann Heermann (1585-1657)

### Text

Here is the popular 1899 translation by Robert S. Bridges. The present harmonization sets the second stanza (in red).

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast Thou offended,  
That man to judge Thee hath in hate pretended?  
By foes derided, by Thine own rejected,  
O most afflicted.

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon Thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee.  
'Twas I, Lord, Jesus, I it was denied Thee!  
I crucified Thee.

## Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit (What My God Wills is Always Best)

The image shows a musical score for the chorale 'Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit'. It is written in G major and common time (C). The score consists of four systems, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a basso continuo line (bass clef). The lyrics are: 'Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit, sein Will, der Zu hel - fen den' er ist be - reit, die an ihn ist der be - ste, Er hilft aus Not, der from-me Gott, gläu - ben fe - ste. und züch - ti - get mit Ma - ßen. Wer Gott ver - traut, fest auf ihn baut, den will er nicht ver - las - sen.'

### When is this heard?

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt." This chorale is heard shortly thereafter. Between Jesus' prayer and the chorale, Bach inserts an aria that sounds his name in tones, inverted. The aria begins with the words, "Gladly will I pick up the cross and drink of the cup as my Savior did" ("Gerne will ich mich bequemen").

### Who wrote it?

*Melody:* attributed to Claudin de Sermisy (ca. 1490-1562) who was a contemporary of Clément Janequin, and may have studied with Josquin des Prez. Sermisy was a priest attached to the Royal Chapel of Louis XII. His interest in sacred music culminated in composition of a Passion according to St. Matthew, one of the few in this genre from the French court.

*Text:* Albrecht von Pruisen (1490-1568) was the last Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, a crusading military order that dissolved upon his conversion to Lutheranism. So far as we know, this is the only hymn by Albert, the Duke of Prussia, who based it on Luther's exposition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It was first published in 1554.

**Text** (as in the Lutheran Hymnal)

The will of God is always best  
And shall be done forever;  
And they who trust in Him are blest,  
He will forsake them never.  
He helps indeed  
In time of need,  
He chastens with forbearing;  
They who depend  
On God, their friend,  
Shall not be left despairing.



## O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß (O Man, Bewail Your Great Sin)

O Mensch, be - wein dein Sün - de groß, //  
von ei - ner Jung - frau rein und zart (orch.)

dar - um Chri - stus seins Va - ters Schoß //  
für uns er hie ge - bo - ren ward (orch.)

äu - ßert und kam auf Er - den; //  
er wollt der Mitt - ler wer - den (orch.)

Den To - ten er das Le - ben gab //  
und legt dar - bei all Krank - heit ab (orch.)

bis sich die Zeit her - dran - ge //  
daß er für uns ge - op - fert würd (orch.)

trüg uns - rer Sün - den schwe - re Bürd //  
wohl an dem Kreu - ze lan - ge (orch.)

### When is this heard?

Shortly after 1:00 a.m., Friday morning, Judas arrives at the Garden of Gethsemane, accompanied by men with swords and clubs. There is an altercation, and Peter slices off the ear of the High Priest's servant. Jesus tells him to put away his sword – “for those who live by the sword will die by the sword” – then surrenders himself to the temple guard. The disciples flee for their lives. At this time we hear the magnificent chorale fantasia, “O Man, bewail your grievous sin,” which brings part 1 of the St. Matthew Passion to a close. In its liturgical context there would now have been a sermon.

Bach originally composed “O Mensch” as the opening chorus for his 1725 revision of the St. John Passion. In his 1727 performance of the St. Matthew, a simple four-part chorale had closed part 1: “I will not let go of my Jesus.” Because it didn't equal the monumentality of the Passion, Bach replaced it in 1736 with this massive double chorus with boy choir sopranos in *ripieno*. The new closing chorus, along with the comparable opener, “Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen,” now frame the first half most suitably. Both are based on chorales.

### Who wrote it?

*Melody:* Matthias Greitner (1495-1552) was a monk in the Strasbourg cathedral and later became a Lutheran pastor. Calvin inserted four of Greitner's psalm tunes into his first hymnal. Among them was the present melody (1525), in versifications of Psalms 36 and 68. Greitner originally associated the present melody with Psalm 119.

*Text:* Sebald Heydens (1499-1561) was born into a wealthy family in Nuremberg. He was a scholar and educator who wrote on subjects ranging from education to theology to music. Heydens is sometimes called the father of modern musicology for his research on theories of *tactus* (musical beat) in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries – *De arte canendi* (1540).

## **Text**

English translation by Catherine Winkworth (19<sup>th</sup> century)

O man, thy grievous sin bemoan,  
For which Christ left His Father's throne,  
From highest heaven descending.  
Of Virgin pure and undefiled  
He here was born, our Savior mild,  
For sin to make atonement.  
The dead He raised to life again.  
The sick He freed from grief and pain.  
Until the time appointed  
That He for us should give His Blood,  
Should bear our sins' o'erwhelming load,  
The shameful Cross enduring.

*Mir hat die Welt trüglich gericht'*  
(How Falsely the World Accuses)

Mir hat die Welt trüglich gericht'  
mit Lü - gen und mit fal - schem Gdicht, viel Netz und  
heim-lich Strik - ke. Herr, nimm mein wahr in die - ser  
Gfahr, bhüt mich für fal - schen Tük - ken!

The image shows a musical score for a chorale. It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a bass line (bass clef). The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are in German and are printed below the vocal line. The music features a simple, hymn-like melody with a steady bass accompaniment.

**When is this heard?**

Jesus is arrested in the dead of night and led from the Mount of Olives to the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest. Peter follows at a distance. The scribes and elders of the people seek false witnesses so that they can condemn Jesus to death, but they find none. The chorale denounces slander and false accusations, then and now, asking for God's protection from them.

**Who wrote it?**

*Melody:* unknown

*Text:* unknown

**Text**

English translation by Edward Elgar and Ivor Atkins (1911)

How falsely doth the world accuse!  
How ready justice to refuse!  
How eager to condemn me!  
In danger's hour,  
Lord, show thy pow'r,  
From ev'ry ill defend me.

*Wer hat dich so geschlagen*  
(O Lord Who Dares to Smite Thee?)

Wer hat dich so ge - schla - gen, mein Heil, und  
dich mit Pla - gen so ü - bel zu - ge - richt?  
Du bist ja nicht ein Sün - der wie wir und uns - re  
Kin - der; von Mis - se - ta - ten weißt du nicht.

The image shows a four-staff musical score for the hymn 'Wer hat dich so geschlagen'. The score is written in G major and 3/4 time. It consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a basso continuo line (bass clef). The lyrics are written below the vocal line. The music features a simple, melodic vocal line and a more complex, rhythmic basso continuo line. The lyrics are in German and English translation.

**When is this heard?**

Bach may well have chosen this hymn entirely for its first line: "O Lord, who dares to smite thee?" Immediately before it is sung, the Evangelist tells how leaders of the religious council had spit in Jesus' face and had slapped him, saying, "Now tell us, Thou Christ, who is he that smote thee?" This happened at the end of the religious trial, where false witnesses had accused Jesus of planning to destroy the temple. The evidence being neither credible nor enough to condemn him, the High Priest probes for more. He orders Jesus to say plainly if he is the Son of God. Jesus affirms that he is. The High Priest tears his clothes in response, and the council pronounces the penalty for blasphemy, which is death. Now the beating, followed by this chorale. Here is the poem in translation by Alison Dobson-Ottmers:

O Lord who dares to smite Thee,  
And falsely to indict Thee,  
Deride and mock Thee so?  
Thou canst not need confession,  
Who knowest not transgression  
As we and all our children know.

This is the second hearing of Isaac's lovely melody in the St. Matthew Passion. It is also a second stanza of Gerhardt's poem.

## Who wrote it?

*Melody:* Heinrich Isaac (1450-1517)

*Text:* Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676)

For more on the composer and poet, see the chorale “Ich bins, ich sollte büßen” (p. 7).

## Text

The present text is the third verse (red below) of sixteen in Paul Gerhardt’s “O Welt, sieh hier dein Leben” (“O World, Look Here upon Your Life”). Here are the first three in translation by John Kelly.

See, world! thy Life assailed;  
On the accurs'd tree nailèd,  
Thy Saviour sinks in death!  
The mighty Prince from Heaven  
Himself hath freely given  
To shame, and blows, and cruel wrath!

Come hither now and ponder,  
'Twill fill thy soul with wonder,  
Blood streams from every pore.  
Through grief whose depth none knoweth,  
From His great heart there floweth  
Sigh after sigh of anguish o'er!

Who is it that afflicts Thee?  
My Saviour, what dejects Thee,  
And causeth all Thy woe?  
Sin Thou committed'st never,  
As we and our seed ever,  
Of deeds of evil nought dost know.

*Bin ich gleich von dir gewichen*  
(*Though I Have Been Away from You, I Return*)



Bin ich gleich von dir ge-wi-chen, stell ich mich doch  
wie-der ein; hat uns doch dein Sohn ver-gli-chen  
durch sein Angst und To-des-pein. Ich ver-leug-ne  
nicht die Schuld; a-ber dei-ne Gnad und Huld ist viel  
grö-ßer als die Sün-de, die ich stets in mir be-fin-de.

**When is this heard?**

The sun has not yet risen on Friday morning, and Jesus is being interrogated by the religious authorities. Peter warms himself by a fire in the courtyard of the High Priest. He is twice accused of being Jesus' disciple, each time denying it. Again he is accused; this time he denies it with a curse. The rooster crows, and Peter remembers Jesus' words of six hours earlier: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." Peter goes out and weeps bitterly.

For many, this aria of Peter's remorse is the most memorable of the St. Matthew Passion. It is for the alto voice with an unforgettable violin obbligato. The alto begins with these words, "Erbarme dich, mein Gott" ("Have mercy on me my God, for the sake of my tears") When she has finished, this chorale is sung: "Though I have strayed from you, I now return."

Bach used this chorale as the last movement of cantata 55, which he had composed in November of 1726, six months earlier. The Gospel text for that Sunday was Matthew 18:23-35, the parable of the unforgiving servant. The cantata emphasizes the opposite of unforgiveness, which is God's mercy. The first two movements reflect on our need for it, and the next two begin with the words "Erbarme dich!" ("Have mercy!"). The cantata's closing chorale, now repeated in the St. Matthew Passion, uses verse six of Johann Rist's poem "Werde munter mein Gemüte" (1642).

## Who wrote it?

*Melody:* Johann Schop (c. 1590-1667) is most famous for the chorale that is heard in “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” from Bach’s cantata 147. The chorale that you are hearing now uses the sixth stanza of that same poem. If you listen carefully, you will hear the same chorale that is in “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring,” though somewhat modified. Schop was admired as a virtuoso violinist, and lived for most of his life in Hamburg.

*Text:* Johann von Rist (1607-1667) was the son of a Lutheran pastor from Hamburg. He wrote plays and dramatic poetry, but is best remembered for his many hymns.

## Text

English translation by Tobin Schmuck.

Though I momentarily withdraw from you,  
I do position myself again;  
your son has indeed likened himself unto us  
through his agony and deathly pain.  
I do not deny my guilt;  
but your mercy and grace  
are far greater than these sins  
which I constantly find within me.

*Befiehl du deine Wege*  
(Commit Thy Way to Jesus)

Be-fiehl du dei-ne We-ge und  
der al-ler-treu-sten Pfle-ge des,  
was dein Her-ze kränkt Der Wol-ken, Luft und  
der den Him-mel lenkt.  
Win-den gibt We-ge, Lauf und Bahn, der wird auch  
We-ge fin-den, da dein Fuß ge-hen kann.

**When is this heard?**

It is Friday morning, the sun has barely risen. The religious authorities have convicted Jesus of blasphemy, for which he must die. This trial, by night, is illegal. Jesus is now interrogated by Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect of Judea, where he is not accused of blasphemy as before (a religious crime), but of insurrection against Rome. Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus replies, "You say it." But Jesus does not say anything in reply to the priest's accusations. Pilate is amazed by his silence.

At this moment of betrayal, illegal proceedings, unjust verdicts and accusations, Bach turns to one of the most comforting poems of his day. The poet is still Paul Gerhardt, but no longer adapting a hymn of Latin origin. The lesson of this new text (in red on the next page) is that one should trust God, even when everything seems crooked and unjust.

Once more the key has dropped a half step from the earlier hearing of this chorale. But it has also returned to a key of sharps. Is this a return to nearness with God? Perhaps.

**Who wrote it?**

*Melody:* Hans Leo Hassler (1564-1612)

*Text:* Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676). This is the first stanza of Gerhardt's 1656 adaptation of Psalm 37: 5, which reads: "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this." The first word of each stanza forms the acrostic: "Befiehl dem Herren deine Wege und hoffe auf ihn, er wirds wohl machen." That sentence is Psalm 37:5 in Luther's translation.



## Text

Commit thy way to Jesus,  
Thy burdens and thy cares;  
He from them all releases,  
He all thy sorrows shares.  
He gives the winds their courses,  
And bounds the ocean's shore,  
He suffers not temptation  
To rise beyond thy power.

*Wie wunderbarlich ist doch diese Strafe!*  
*(How Astonishing is this Sentence Indeed!)*

Wie wun - der - bar - lich ist doch die - se  
 Stra - fe! Der gu - te Hir - te lei - det für die  
 Scha - fe, die Schuld be - zahlt der Her - re, der Ge -  
 rech - te, für sei - ne Knech - te.

**When is this heard?**

The Roman trial is in progress, and the governor, Pontius Pilate, has a problem. In the other Gospels we learn that he has found no fault with Jesus of Nazareth. He is innocent. But this rabble will hear none of it.

Pilate has another prisoner whose name is, ironically, Jesus bar-Abbas, which means “Jesus, the Son of the Father.” While Matthew says only that Barabbas was notorious, Mark and Luke indicate that his crime was to have incited riot. But St. John provides the most revealing insight into this man, whom he calls a “bandit,” a word that the historian Josephus used of anti-Roman zealots. So Barabbas had been convicted of insurrection, a capital offense. He will be crucified today.

But custom requires that on the Passover Pilate should release a prisoner by popular acclaim. He offers them a choice between Jesus of Nazareth or Jesus Barabbas. Knowing of the Nazarene’s popularity among common people, Pilate is sure that they will choose to free him. But the protagonists have incited the crowd to demand the release of Barabbas. Pilate then asks what he is to do with Jesus of Nazareth? The crowd shouts, “Crucify him!”

Then we hear this chorale. It is the most pronounced contrast of the drama, perhaps of any. Bach has carefully chosen the words for this moment. You see, the charge for which Jesus of Nazareth will be crucified under Roman law is that of insurrection. His crime, proclaimed in writing above his head while hanging on the cross, is to have been “King of the Jews.” But he is innocent, and Barabbas is the insurrectionist. Thus the guilty goes free and the innocent man pays for his crime. Hear now the words of this chorale:

How astonishing is this sentence indeed!  
The good shepherd suffers for the sheep,  
the debt is paid by the master, the righteous one,  
for his servants.

This is the last of three hearings of the “Herzliebster Jesu” chorale. In the first, the disciples had asked Jesus why this punishment. In the second, the poet told of our own guilt. Now in this final hearing the two thoughts are combined, with the innocent Jesus paying the penalty for another's crime.

The high key and chromatics of this chorale, sung very softly, lend the performance an ethereal quality.

### Who wrote it?

*Melody:* Johann Crüger (1598-1662)

*Text:* Johann Heermann (1585-1657)

### Text

Here is the popular 1899 translation by Robert S. Bridges. The present harmonization sets the third stanza (in red).

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast Thou offended,  
That man to judge Thee hath in hate pretended?  
By foes derided, by Thine own rejected,  
O most afflicted.

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon Thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee.  
'Twas I, Lord, Jesus, I it was denied Thee!  
I crucified Thee.

Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered;  
The slave hath sinned, and the Son hath suffered;  
For man's atonement, while he nothing heedeth,  
God intercedeth.

## O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden (O Sacred Head, Now Wounded)

1. { O Haupt voll Blut und Wun - den, voll  
o Haupt, zu Spott ge - bun - den mit

2. { Du ed - les An - ge - sich - te, da -  
das gro - ße Welt - ge - wich - te, wie

Schmerz und vol - ler Hohn, o Haupt, sonst schön ge -  
ei - ner Dor - nen - kron, für sonst schrickt und scheut wie bist du so er -  
bist du so be - speit, wie bist du so er -

1. zie - ret mit höch - ster Ehr und Zier, jetzt a - ber  
2. blei - chet! Wer hat dein Au - gen - licht, dem sonst kein

hoch schimp - fie - ret, ge - grü - ßet seist du mir!  
Licht nicht glei - chet, so schänd - lich zu - ge - richt'?

### When is this heard?

After pronouncing Jesus innocent, Pilate does a curious thing. He declares his own! This he does by washing his hands of the matter and turning Jesus over to be flogged as per wish of the mob. Bach's poet collaborator, Picander, can hardly contain himself, for he writes a poem in which the alto soloist tries to intervene. She appeals to the perpetrators for pity! "Can your hearts be that hard?", she asks. But to no avail. The brutality continues as the guards plait a crown of thorns and press it into Jesus' head. They give him a flimsy reed as scepter, and bow their knees in mock homage, taunting him: "Hail, King of the Jews!"

To this cruelty Bach responds with a chorale. Once more it is Paul Gerhardt's German rendition of the Latin hymn, "Salve mundi salutare." As before, it is in awe of Jesus' countenance – his face and head.

This is the only harmonization where two stanzas are sung (red text on the next page). As per the established pattern, it returns to a flat key. Here is the pattern so far: #### - bbb - ## - b. Can you predict the next key?

### Who wrote it?

*Melody:* Hans Leo Hassler (1564-1612).

*Text:* Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676) a German adaptation of Arnulf of Leuven's 13<sup>th</sup> century "Salve mundi salutare" ("Hail to Thee, Savior of the World").

## Text

The following English translation (1830) is by the American Presbyterian minister, J. W. Alexander.

O sacred Head, now wounded,  
with grief and shame weighed down,  
Now scornfully surrounded  
with thorns, Thine only crown;  
How pale Thou art with anguish,  
with sore abuse and scorn!  
How does that visage languish,  
which once was bright as morn!

Now from Thy cheeks has vanished  
their color once so fair;  
From Thy red lips is banished  
the splendor that was there.  
Grim death, with cruel rigor,  
hath robbed Thee of Thy life;  
Thus Thou hast lost Thy vigor,  
Thy strength in this sad strife.

## Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden

(When One Day I Shall Die, Be Thou My Comfort)

Wenn ich ein - mal soll schei - den, so schei - de  
wenn ich den Tod soll lei - den, so tritt du  
nicht von mir, Wenn mir am al - ler - bäng - sten  
denn her - für!  
wird um das Her - ze sein, so reiße mich - aus den  
Äng - sten kraft dei - ner Angst und Pein!

## When is this heard?

This is the last chorale of the St. Matthew Passion, and the fifth hearing of the passion chorale. It transpires immediately after Jesus has died. At this moment Bach wants us to remember our own deaths (red text on the next page). By identifying with Jesus in *his* death, we help him; and in turn *he* will help us. This is the lesson of this chorale, the only one in Bach's Passion that is in a key without sharps or flats. After all of the emotional uncertainty, all of the movement toward God and away, we've now come to the center.

While the key signature is void, the harmonization itself has many accidentals, particularly on the words, "When most anxiously I am at my heart's end" ("Wenn mir am allerbängsten wird um das Herze sein"). These words need sixteen accidentals! If the chorale is peaceful on the whole, yet there is anguish at its center, especially in the bass voice.

What are we to make of this void key signature? Is it without life? It may surprise you to know that Bach demonstrated a novel tuning system where music could be written in *every* key. In the Well-Tempered Clavier he composed in keys at the opposite end of this chorale – that is, with many sharps or flats. Six of these keys overlap, and could have been written either way, in sharps or flats ("enharmonics"). In the St. Matthew Passion for example, the six-flat key of, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" could have been written with six sharps.

Bach's friend Andreas Werckmeister, who invented the tuning system that could do this, likened enharmonics

to resurrection,<sup>1</sup> after St. Paul's words, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye." In his B-minor Mass, Bach famously used enharmonics to set, "I await the resurrection of the dead" from the Nicene Creed. There, in a twinkling of an eye, he changed from the key of b-flat minor (five flats) to C-sharp major (seven sharps)!

But here now, at the moment of this chorale, there are no sharps or flats in the signature. We are at the key opposite of resurrection. We are at the moment of Jesus' death, and ours.

### Who wrote it?

*Melody:* Hans Leo Hassler (1564-1612)

*Text:* Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676). Here Bach harmonizes the last stanza of Gerhardt's German adaptation of the Latin hymn, "Salve mundi salutare" ("Hail to Thee, Savior of the World"), by Arnulf of Leuven.

### Text

The following English translation (1830) is by the American Presbyterian minister, J. W. Alexander.

Be Thou my consolation,  
my shield when I must die;  
Remind me of Thy passion  
when my last hour draws nigh.  
Mine eyes shall then behold Thee,  
upon Thy cross shall dwell,  
My heart by faith enfolds Thee.  
Who dieth thus dies well.

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<sup>1</sup> Werckmeister called enharmonicism a "great metamorphosis in the harmony . . . in an instant one passes from one genus to another," and a "mirror and image of our mortality and incompleteness of this life." See Eric Chafe, *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach*, p. 83.

## *Jesum laß ich nicht von mir* (I Shall Not Leave My Jesus)

The image shows a musical score for a chorale in G major, 3/4 time. It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a basso continuo line (bass clef). The lyrics are written below the vocal line. The first system contains the first three measures: 'Je - sum laß ich nicht von mir, geh ihm e - wig'. The second system contains the next four measures: 'an der\_ Sei - ten; Chri - stus läßt mich für und für'. The third system contains the next four measures: 'zu dem Le - bens - bäch - lein\_ lei - ten. Se - lig,'. The fourth system contains the final four measures: 'wer mit mir so spricht: Mei - nen\_ Je - sum laß\_ ich nicht.' The music features a steady bass line and a vocal melody with some grace notes and slurs.

### **When is this heard?**

Today this chorale is not heard in the St. Matthew Passion, but it was Bach's original (1727) conclusion to part 1. In that version it was sung after the disciples abandoned Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and immediately before the sermon. The Passion received two performances in this form, in 1727 and again in 1729. Bach substantially revised the work in 1736, and this chorale was replaced by "O Mensch beweine deine Sünde groß." The 1736 revision was definitive, and this is the version that we hear today.

### **Who wrote it?**

*Melody:* Andreas Hammerschmidt (ca. 1611-1676) was an organist and prolific composer of both secular and liturgical music. His sacred compositions were important precursors to the church cantata in the style of J. S. Bach. Hammerschmidt was known as the "Orpheus of Zittau." This chorale was first published in 1658.

*Text:* Christian Keymann (1607-1662) was a close associate of Andreas Hammerschmidt, the chorale's composer. Both families came from Bohemia which they had to leave because of the religious upheaval there during the Thirty Years War. Keymann was a scholar and educator, and wrote some thirteen hymns, all of great poetic beauty.



## Text

English translation by Francis Browne. Bach used the sixth stanza (red below).

I shall not leave my Jesus.  
Since he has given himself to me,  
my duty therefore demands  
that I should cling to him like a limpet;  
he is the light of my life;  
I shall not leave my Jesus.

I shall never leave Jesus,  
while I must live on earth;  
with confidence I have given to him  
what I have and am;  
everything is directed towards him:  
I shall not leave my Jesus.

Let sight pass away  
let hearing, taste, sensation fade,  
let the last day's light  
of this world reach me,  
as the thread of life breaks;  
I shall not leave my Jesus.

I shall also not leave him,  
when I have once reached the place  
where before his face  
the faith of righteous Christians is resplendent;  
his face gives me delight;  
I shall not leave my Jesus.

Not for the world, not for heaven  
does my soul wish and long;  
its wish is for Jesus and his light,  
who has reconciled me with God  
who was freed me from the law court;  
I shall not leave my Jesus.

I shall not let Jesus go from me,  
I shall go along always by his side;  
for ever and ever Christ will  
lead me to the waters of life.  
Blessed is the man who says with me;  
I shall not leave my Jesus.