

Let's dive into the piece you are about to hear. Johann Sebastian Bach was the kantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig during this final iteration of the cantata. I say final iteration because the original version of this piece was actually written in 1715 during his time in Weimar. Instead of a cantata celebrating the Reformation, it was for the third Sunday in Lent. The Gospel reading for that particular Sunday is the temptation of Jesus and His battle with the devil. As it continues for us Lutherans today, whenever we have that Gospel reading, the appointed hymn of the day is "A Mighty Fortress." However, we have shifted it to the first Sunday in Lent. Hence, you will hear what seems to be a sort of musical dichotomy between the joyous Reformation movements and more somber Lenten movements.

So why didn't Bach just keep this cantata in Lent like he did in Weimar? Well, in Leipzig, according to tradition, church music was not allowed at all during the time of Lent. Bach, being the resourceful genius that he is, had to rework the cantata to fit the grand celebrations that took place in Leipzig for the anniversary of the Reformation.

This takes us to the first movement which was written to fit the celebration tone of the Reformation. Now remind yourselves, Bach was the master of the fugue, a type of music where a subject is interposed on top of itself through three or more voices. Today, the fugue subject is passed among four voices, soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. This piece can be described as a collection of a bunch of mini fugue expositions, as Bach takes the phrases of the familiar chorale tune and does a fugue off of it. If having a four part fugue wasn't enough, Bach throws in a two part canon. As the choir does its thing with the fugue, the oboes present the unornamented chorale tune followed by the bassoon and bass trombone two beats later. This movement has been described as one of the ultimate strokes of genius the composer has ever had, and possibly one of the more difficult to perform, something I didn't tell the choir when we started learning this piece. Halfway through the movement,

you may feel the mood shifts from being joyous to a bit ominous as Bach starts to depict the old enemy who is cunning and treacherous, the devil.

The second movement forces us to not only focus on the musicality of Bach, but also his theology. This movement, which features a bass and soprano, has the second verse of the hymn and a libretto by Salomon Franck. Here, the movement starts with an exciting battle motif by the violins that goes through out the song. Fitting within the theme of a fortress, the libretto, sung by the bass, calls for Christians to take up arms and get ready for the battle underneath the blood-stained banner of Christ. The image I get from this is almost like a general readying his men for war. However, the soprano, in a steady and calm manner, sings the second verse of our chorale, which talks about how we as Christians can do nothing with out Christ. This musical image of us fighting the devil and sin stresses for our reliance and need for Christ in that soprano melody.

In the third movement we get a recit, which is a baroque technique to get a lot of words into a piece of music rather quickly. Often glossed over for not being the most exciting, they tend to be the most important in either a narrative, or in this case, theology. Harkening to its Lenten origin, we are reminded of God's love for us which Jesus won us through his blood. This reminder is calling us to also become a fortress, guarding our hearts, which is "God's heaven on Earth," and to not give into temptation and let it become a wasteland. How do we do this? Well, when Bach repeats something multiple times, it's important. To quote the libretto, we need to "Repent our guilt with pain, so that Christ's spirit may firmly bind itself to us!"

The fourth movement then gives us this perspective through the soprano solo and the cello. Here we have the libretto acting as the Christian repenting in great pain asking for Christ to come into our hearts. Additionally the Christian is also demanding that the sin flees his

or her presence to make way for Christ. The way Bach sets this melody is almost a wailing motif. The cello, however, almost having the same motif starts in its upper register, then comes down, almost to paint the image of Christ coming down from heaven to enter the heart of the Christian.

The next movement features the choir again, but this time all in unison while the orchestra is almost frantically playing the accompaniment. This unison is a striking change from everything else that happens in the cantata as they sing the third verse. Its as if we are back again fighting the devil in battle but now that Christ has joined us and we are one again with him, we can sing joyously knowing we will win the battle. This idea is featured again in the recit that follows featuring the tenor. As it states, if we keep the Word as we hear it in our hearts, we will become victorious and win our prize: Christ.

With the penultimate movement, the alto and tenor have a solo that is quite different from everything else that has happened. We start with the basso continuo, solo violin, and solo oboe painting this serene image of happiness, intimacy, and calmness, almost like a pastoral. Our vocalists come into this setting proclaiming “How happy are they, who bear God in their mouths, yet happier is the heart that bears him in faith!” The music, with the libretto, paints the joy we can get with a union with Christ. Halfway through, the battle imagery makes its appearance for the last time saying that with the word, we’ll remain unconquered and can strike deafening blows to our enemy, sin and the devil. With our victory, we’ll get our crown, only when we conquer the last villain: death. Much more prominent in early Lutheran writings, there is almost a longing for death, which is a sweet rest from our labors, we won’t have to battle the fights of this world of sin, illness, and hardships anymore, and that is when our salvation in Christ is made complete. Bach paints the death of the Christian in a really freaky harmonic progression. But what happens after death? We’re back into

the joy and bliss from the beginning of the movement, this time fully in the presence of Christ.

As with every cantata that was preformed in the Church Service, the last movement is a harmonization of the Chorale as if it was being played on the organ. The custom was for the congregation to join in to sing the hymn. The words are printed in the program for you to follow along, and if you want, you can even join in singing with us on the last movement. Just make sure you sing the German, not the English. Enjoy.