



**A Guide to Music by J. S. Bach
being played throughout Lent**

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An introduction

From the start of Lent to Easter Day, all the organ music played for services and several hymns will be by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). Bach's music is some of the greatest art ever created, combining absolute technical mastery and inventiveness with emotional immediacy, all infused with Bach's own deep theological reflection and profound insight into the nature of humanity. His music distills the musical styles of his predecessors and contemporaries, both locally and internationally, and stands at the pinnacle of the Baroque.

Bach spent most of his working life as a church organist and director of music; much of his music is religious in content, most obviously his church cantatas and Passion settings. His organ music can broadly be divided into 'free' works, built on original thematic material, and 'chorale preludes' which are based on the Lutheran hymns which Bach and congregations would have known by heart. These hymns, or 'chorales', were at the heart of the Lutheran liturgy and typically introduced by an improvised chorale prelude.

J S Bach's chorale preludes for organ stand as some of the most profound expressions of Lutheran liturgical music. Those written for Lent and Passiontide duly convey themes of prayer, suffering and penitence, Bach using musical symbolism such as descending chromatic lines (representing grief) or suspensions (suggesting tension). These pieces not only serve as musical commentaries on hymn texts but also enhance the devotional atmosphere of worship during this solemn season.

In summary, Bach's Lenten and Passiontide chorale preludes are among his most moving works, offering a musical meditation on the themes of sacrifice and redemption. I hope that in the variety of styles and moods of these works you will find something to move you and give you opportunity for reflection this Lent.

In this penitential season, please try to be quiet before the service, and do stay for the pieces at the end.

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February 22nd

Lent 1

Chorale Prelude before the service:

Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt - BWV637 (from the *Orgelbüchlein*)

*Through Adam's fall is totally spoiled
all human nature and being,
the same poison is bequeathed to us
from which we cannot be delivered
without the solace of God, who has
redeemed us from great disgrace
by which the serpent forced Eve
to draw God's anger down upon herself.*

This is Bach's musical depiction of the Fall of Man, portrayed with downward intervals of the seventh in the pedals and diminished chords. The poison and the serpent are evoked by twisting, dissonant chromaticism in the inner parts and destabilising rhythms. In just three minutes, it demonstrates Bach's ability to translate theological meaning into musical imagery.

Gradual Hymn (melody 1682: harmonised by Bach)

460 - Strengthen for service, Lord

Tune: Ach gott und herr

Hymn during communion (melody Henrich Albert: harmonised by Bach)

333 - May the grace of Christ our Saviour

Tune: Gott des Himmels

Music after the service:

Praeludium in C minor BWV546

A dramatic and intense organ piece in 12/8 time, it begins with bold chords over a tonic pedal note followed by long passages of flowing quavers creating a sense of forward momentum. The deep, resonant tone of the organ enhances the emotional weight - a profound example of Bach's ability to blend technical brilliance with expressive depth.

March 1st

Lent 2

Chorale Prelude before the service:

Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ - BWV639 (from the *Orgelbüchlein*)

*I call to you, Lord Jesu Christ,
I beg, hear my complaint;
grant me grace at this time,
let me not despair.
The true faith, Lord, I aspire to,
which you wish to give me,
[is] to live unto you,
to be of use to my neighbour,
to keep your word.*

This is a deeply expressive chorale prelude evoking prayerful supplication. The melody in the soprano, accompanied by a gently sighing accompaniment of semiquavers in the left hand – suggestive of string bowing - and quavers in the pedal, together creating a gently moving and expressive harmonic world. Bach transforms a simple hymn into a concentrated meditation.

Offertory Hymn (Tune and harmonisation by Bach)

381 - O Lord of our salvation

Tune: Innsbruck

Music after the service:

Chorale Prelude BWV680

Wir glauben all an einen Gott (We all believe in one God)

This hymn was Luther's paraphrase of the Apostle's Creed. Bach hides the melody in a classic German organ fugue in D minor, whilst a firm, repeating pedal motif speaks of a strong and bold faith. The step nature of the pedal part gives rise to its nickname, 'Giant fugue'.

March 8th
Lent 3

Chorale Prelude before the service:

Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier - BWV731

*Blessed Jesus, at your word
we are gathered all to hear you.
Let our hearts and souls be stirred
now to seek and love and fear you.
By your gospel pure and holy,
teach us, Lord, to love you solely.*

Although in a major key (G), this Chorale Prelude has a bitter-sweet quality and the chorale is associated with prayer and meditation. The melody is embellished while Bach weaves a three-part accompaniment, reminiscent of a slow concerto movement, creating a mood of quiet humility and devotion.

Gradual Hymn (melody 1645: harmonised by Bach)

265 - Jesu, thou joy of loving hearts

Tune: Eisenach

***Hymn during communion (melody Johann Ahle: harmonized by Bach)
preceded by a second short Chorale Prelude on Liebster Jesu BWV730***

107 - Dearest Jesu, we are here

Tune: Liebster Jesu

Music after the service:

Fugue on Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt BWV705

This is a stately and sombre fugue based on the Lutheran chorale of the same name, evoking the Fall of Man (see text on 22 February). Bach weaves this theme through various voices, using counterpoint and harmonic tension to build a complex, layered texture.

March 15th

Lent 4 and Mothering Sunday

Chorale Prelude before the service:

Meine Seele, erhebt den Herren - BWV648
(from the Six 'Schübler' Chorale Preludes)

*My soul magnifies the Lord
And my spirit rejoices in God my saviour
He remembers his mercy
And helps his servant Israel.*

This is one of Bach's Six 'Schübler' Chorale Preludes which are essentially organ transcriptions of earlier cantata movements, published around 1748 by Johann Georg Schübler. This setting is subdued, opening and closing with the same ostinato for pedal so that the piece has an unusual symmetry while the harmonization of the melody is chromatic.

Hymn during communion (Melody by and bass line by Bach)

78 - Christ is the world's true light
Tune: Kommt seelen

Music after the service:

Prelude and Fugue in C minor, BWV 549

A work by the twenty-year-old Bach, then organist at the Neue Kirche in Arnstadt, it clearly follows the style of the free fantasias of North Germans, Buxtehude and Brühns. The piece opens with a long questioning pedal solo while the fugue has an infectious theme which is developed contrapuntally until the pedal finally comes in with the fugue subject, reverting to a free fantasia to the end.

March 22nd

Lent 5: Passion Sunday

Chorale Prelude before the service:

O Mensch, beweine dein' Sünde groß - BWV622: (from the *Orgelbüchlein*)

*O man, weep for your great sin,
for which Christ left his Father's bosom and came to earth,
of a virgin pure and gentle he was born here for us,
to become the mediator for us all.
He gave life to the dead and put away all sickness,
until the time came on that he should be sacrificed,
bearing the heavy burden of our sins long on the cross.*

Passion Sunday provides the opportunity to listen to this piece which sits at the emotional heart of all those performed this Lent. The melody is treated flexibly with an accompaniment of sighing motifs. The dissonances of the final few bars, including an extraordinary F flat, depict the agony of the crucifixion. Only Bach could have written a chorale setting of such painful intensity yet sublime beauty.

Hymn during communion (melody Johann Crüger 1656: harmonized by Bach)

389 - O Sacred head, surrounded (Herzlich tut mich verlangen)

Tune: Passion Chorale

Chorale Prelude during communion

Herzlich tut mich verlangen BWV727 (Passion Chorale)

This chorale prelude conveys deep melancholy through its slow, winding harmonies and expressive ornamentation.

Music after the service:

Fantasia in C minor in 5 parts BWV562

This melancholy fantasia, with its ornamented short motifs, is heavily indebted to French organ music by composers such as de Grigny and Clérambault: although it feels improvisatory in style, the traditional German pedal points are again present and Bach demonstrates his mastery as it develops to five-part counterpoint.

March 29th
Palm Sunday

Chorale Prelude before the service:

An Wasserflüssen Babylon - BWV653a:

*By the waters of Babylon we sat down in sorrow,
when we thought of Zion we wept from our hearts.
Sorrowfully we hung up our organs and harps
on their trees of willow, which are in their country
there we had to suffer much shame and disgrace daily at their hands.*

This is an early piece - a languorous setting of a hymn paraphrase of Psalm 137 - written in Weimar, expressing exile and lament. The highly ornamented chorale melody unfolds slowly in the soprano, while a gently flowing accompaniment evokes the waters of Babylon as a sarabande. Subtle chromaticism and expressive dissonance deepen the mood of sorrowful reflection.

Hymn during communion (melody by Seth Calvisius: harmonised by Bach)

536 - We sing the praise of him who died

Tune: Ach bleib bei uns

Music after the service:

Praeludium in B minor – BWV544

Bach's Praeludium in B minor is a dramatic and expansive organ work. It opens with a bold, descending motif in the right hand, accompanied by a flowing, yet strong bass line. With rapid runs and intricate counterpoint, it showcases Bach's ability to blend technical brilliance with emotional depth in a powerful, evocative manner.

April 2nd
Maundy Thursday

Chorale Prelude before the service:

Erbarm' dich mein, o Herre Gott - BWV721

*Be merciful to me, O Lord God
according to your great mercy
wash me cleanly of my misdoing:
I know my sin and it grieves me.
Only against you have I sinned,
and it is constantly before me:
evil cannot stand before you.
You are just, however to be judged.*

An early work, this is an intimate, expressive meditation on penitence and supplication. The chorale melody is ornamented, unfolding over a slow-moving harmonic foundation with tension and release. Its Italianate style, rich suspensions and poignant dissonances convey humility and pleading devotion.

During the washing of feet:

Chorale Preludes on Vater unser im Himmelreich: BWV737 and 683

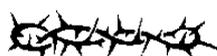
Martin Luther's German paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer was sung every Sunday in Bach's churches, and Bach must have improvised on the melody countless times. After playing over the Chorale as harmonised by Bach, the first setting is an early work, in the style of South German composers such as Pachelbel. The second is a delicate and elegant triple-time setting from the mature Bach.

There is silence at the end of this service



April 3rd
Good Friday

Music – which, exceptionally this Lent – will not be by Bach, but will be selected to follow the subject of each of the series of meditations



April 5th EASTER DAY

Music before the service:

Prelude & Fugue in C major - BWV545

The great French composer, Olivier Messiaen, describes the key of C major as 'dazzling white light'; so what better way to greet Easter than with Bach's early Prelude and Fugue in C. It opens boldly, alternating chordal passages and flowing scales, creating a sense of majestic energy; the fugue subject is both lyrical and assertive, the final statement in the pedal in augmentation grandly refers back to the opening of the Prelude. (Incidentally, this was also the first piece of music to be heard in public on the new organ at St Mary's on Easter Day, 1996).

Choir Anthem

Rejoice, O my spirit (Auf, freue dich, Seele): from Bach's Cantata BWV15

*Up, rejoice my soul, now you have your consolation,
Your Saviour, who has redeemed you from death.
Hell trembles, Satan succumbs,
Death is defeated, the soul is victorious.
I speak defiance to all you who wage war against me.*

Communion hymn (Tune by Hinze 1622-1702, harmonised by Bach)

45 - At the Lamb's high feast we sing

Tune: Salzburg

Music after the service:

Prelude & Fugue in C major - BWV547

To close this exploration of the music of Bach, one of his most significant and mature Preludes and Fugues (lasting around 11 minutes). The Prelude is in 12/8 time signature with bright flowing quaver lines in the manuals while the pedal part has a 'hop, step and jump'. The fugue statement is stately and develops into complex counterpoint; the pedal arrives triumphantly on the last page in augmentation and brings the piece to a resounding, majestic conclusion.

The Organs for which J.S. Bach wrote music

J S Bach composed his chorale preludes for the instruments available to him by the great organ builders of the day such as Arp Schnitger and Gottfried Silbermann, several of which can be heard and played to this day. These differ from modern organs in construction, tuning, and tonal characteristics.

There was, of course, no electricity at the time so that the bellows, which hold wind to feed the pipes, were raised by two or more men pumping bellows, usually by hand. Mechanical ('tracker') key action - where keys are directly connected to the pipes via wooden rods - was used, allowing for precise articulation and a responsive touch. Baroque organs lacked swell boxes, so dynamics were controlled through manual changes and registration rather than swell pedals.

There were a variety of unequal tuning systems in use in the 18th century. Unequal temperament is a tuning system in which the twelve notes of the octave are not spaced evenly. Some intervals, especially common keys, are tuned 'pure' while others sound just slightly dissonant. This gives each key a distinct character or colour but limits modulation to distant keys. Bach's 'Well-tempered Clavier' - 48 preludes and fugues in all keys - demonstrated the flexibility of 'equal temperament' suggests it was probably Bach's favoured tuning system. Our ears have long taken 'equal temperament' to be the norm.

Although Bach, like his contemporaries, rarely left specific instructions as to registration (organ stops used in a piece of music) we know the sounds that ranks of pipes of the day sound like, speaking on a low wind pressure. Clarity of polyphony was paramount and pipes of the time have a transparency in their voicing - unlike the duller, if louder, sounds of later Romantic organs.

Our organ at St Mary's is necessarily eclectic but shares many characteristics and sounds that would have been familiar to Bach: it has mechanical action, low pressure, clear voicing of pipes and tuned to equal temperament. Although having just 20 stops, registrations can approximate the sounds of the Baroque.





Bach's manuscript of 'Ich ruf du dir' from the Orgelbuchlein



J S Bach's monogram