

The dying Bach's last composition: *Before thy Throne I now appear*

Why is this chorale prelude so significant? Because JSB packed more 'Bach Symbolism' into these few bars than in any other composition! This short chorale prelude is, perhaps, one of the most extraordinary compositions that Bach ever made because of (a) how he created it and (b) the abounding Bachian number symbolism that it contains, most of which is easily perceived but some of which is very well hidden indeed.

Ernest Newman, whom Grove's *Dictionary of Music & Musicians* described as "the most celebrated British music critic in the first half of the 20th century", wrote: 'The chorale preludes are the key to the very heart of Bach'. How much more must it be true of this, the last chorale prelude that Bach ever composed for in the last week of his life, after a stroke and being virtually blind (having had an unsuccessful operation on his eyes by the same surgeon who had operated equally unsuccessfully on Handel), he dictated it to his son-in-law, Johann Christoph Altnickol.

CHORALE: 'WENN WIR' or 'VOR DEINEN'

Bach chose a chorale prelude on the tune of *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen sein* ('When we are in deepest need') which he'd already set in his *Orgelbüchlein*, but for this, his last work, he chose different words: *Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit* ('Before thy throne I now appear'). So this was a statement of faith of a dying Christian who knew that he was about to meet his God. The work he produced is wholly amazing for, of course, he was unable to see the written page and yet he was able to pack into this short work an astonishing amount of Bachian number symbolism. It is also a most beautiful composition: organists cannot fail to be moved by it when they play it.

Before thy Throne I now appear,
O Lord! Bow down thy gracious Ear,
Reject not from thy loving Face
A sinful Wretch, who sues for Grace.

It is written, at first sight, as a simple chorale prelude, with counterpoint based closely on the chorale melody and with the main melody (Cantus Firmus or CF) played in longer notes towards the end of each short section. There are four lines of words set to the four lines of music: Bach treats each line as a short fugue BUT, in writing each section as a strict fugue, he makes each countersubject the *inversion* of the subject. This went against the custom of making the countersubject different in style from the subject (i.e. providing a Theme B to go against Theme A, which eventually led to the basis of first-movement Sonata form in the Classical period).

However, Bach creates these inversions so consistently and so inevitably that it's easy to overlook them.

Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein.
When in the hour of utmost need

(Annotated--John Bertalot)

VOR DEINEN THRON [Before Thy Throne I now appear]

The musical score is written for piano in G major and 3/4 time. It consists of the following sections:

- 1st fuguetta:** The first section, starting with a treble clef and a common time signature. It features a complex, rhythmic melody in the right hand and a steady accompaniment in the left hand.
- CF 1:** A chorale fantasia section marked with a first ending bracket and numbered measures 1 through 6. It includes a melodic line with a trill in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand.
- 2nd fuguetta:** The second fuguetta, continuing the complex melodic and rhythmic patterns.
- CF 2:** A second chorale fantasia section, marked with a second ending bracket.
- 3rd fuguetta:** The third fuguetta, with a note that the second half is inverted. It features a more active bass line.
- CF 3:** A third chorale fantasia section, marked with a third ending bracket.
- 4th fuguetta:** The final fuguetta, ending with a melodic flourish in the right hand.
- CF 4:** A fourth and final chorale fantasia section, marked with a fourth ending bracket and numbered measures 35, 36, 37, and 38. It concludes with a **Cadence**.

But it doesn't sound right, even if one flattened most of the Bs from the start of that phrase and ended with a *tierce de picardie*. However, there was no need to add *B A C H*, for he had **already** signed his name there (in the final notes in the tenor and alto parts)!

And, there is further number significance.....

Counting the number of notes in that final trio entry gives $3 \times 9 = 27$

And 27 was significant for Bach because it could represent the Trinity: $3 \times 3 \times 3$.

And, of course, the two digits of 27 give $2 \times 7 = 14$: the **BACH** number!

How many notes are there in the alto part? 9

How many notes are there in the two tenor parts? 18

How many notes are there in the bass part? 2

And the letters represented by numbers 9,18 and 2 are **JSB**!

[Taken from presentations given at King's College, Cambridge, Southwell Minster, the Three Choirs Festival and at Blackburn between 1986 and 2010]

Bach's logo which he designed himself.

Can you see what those curly lines are saying (both forwards and backwards)?

The forwards version is coloured to make it easier to see.

