

# BWV 118

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NBA III/1; BC B23a/b

J. S. Bach labeled this work "motet," yet it is similar to the chorale fantasias that begin cantatas of Bach's chorale cantata cycle.

Occasion: Perhaps a funeral or memorial service  
Librettist: Martin Behm (1557–1622): 1610 chorale, adapted from a 1608 setting with similar beginning.

Although only the first stanza is given in the autograph score, a "dal segno" marking suggests multiple stanzas would have been sung.

According to Martin Petzoldt (*Bach Kommentar* 3:574) it was widely disseminated, with a Dresden hymnal printing two versions side by side: one version with 12 stanzas, the other with 15. (see note for more).

FP: 1736/37 (first autograph version), 1746/47 (second autograph version).

Instrumentation (first version)

Lituo I, II (see note)

Cornetto

Trombone I, II, III

SATB

This version was presumably performed out of doors, e.g., at a graveside.

The later version adds strings, continuo, and optional 3

oboes and

basoon

(presumably

doubling the

vocal lines).

See note

for more.

Translation:

O Jesus Christ, light of my life,  
my refuge, my comfort, my confidence,  
on earth I am only a guest  
and the burden of sin presses down heavily upon me.

Biblical allusions include Jesus' words "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), passages that refer to God as refuge and confidence (e.g., Psalm 94:22), Psalm 119:19: I am a sojourner on earth (Luther 1545: Ich bin ein Gast auf Erden), and Psalm 38:4: My iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me (Luther 1545: Denn meine Sünden gehen über mein Haupt, wie eine schwere Last sind sie mir zu schwer worden).

J.S. Bach

## Motet BWV 118 • Prayer to Jesus in view of the brevity and sinfulness of life.

### O Jesu Christ, Mein's Lebens Licht

Use of alla breve meter with brass playing largely *colla parte* is characteristic of the traditional motet style (*stile antico*).

1. Lit. §

Corn.

Tromb.

The trombone theme derives from the alto and tenor voices accompanying chorale line 2.

B-flat major, B-flat pedal...

B-flat major

B-flat major, B-flat pedal...  
Throbbing bass suggests a dirge...

5. Lit.

Corn.

F7 B-flat major G7 C7 F major F pedal... F7 B-flat major

10. Lit.

Corn.

(C7) F(7) B-flat 7 G7 C minor

14. Lit.

Corn.

F7 B-flat major A-flat major B-flat 7 (E-flat major) E-flat major E dim.7 C major

Lines 1 & 2: The cantus firmus is accompanied in the lower 3 voices by imitative counterpoint derived from the chorale phrase.

18. **Soprano**

Line 1 alludes to Jesus' words, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

Musical score for Soprano, Alto, Tenore, and Basso voices, measures 18-22. The Soprano part begins with a rest, then sings "O Je - su Christ, Christ,". The Alto part sings "O Je - su Christ, mein's Le -". The Tenore part sings "O Je - su Christ, mein's Le -". The Basso part sings "O Je - su Christ, mein's Le -".

In the choral sections, the instruments largely double the voices.

Musical score for instruments, measures 18-22. The score includes parts for Cornu. Pos. and strings. The strings are in B-flat major. A red box indicates "The litui fall silent for chorale line 1.".

23.

Musical score for Soprano, Alto, Tenore, and Basso voices, measures 23-27. The Soprano part continues with "bens and Licht, Light,". The Alto part sings "bens Licht, and Light,". The Tenore part sings "Licht, Light". The Basso part sings "Je - su Christ, mein's Le -".

Musical score for instruments, measures 23-27. The score includes parts for strings and woodwinds. The strings are in B-flat major, F major, and G7.

27.

Alto crosses above cantus firmus.

Christ, mein's Le - - - bens Licht,  
Christ, my Life and Light,

- - - - - bens Licht,  
and Light,

Licht, mein's Le - - - bens Licht,  
Light, my Life and Light,

C minor

C minor C pedal...

Line 2 alludes to biblical passages that refer to God as refuge and confidence (e.g., Psalm 94:22: The Lord has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge).

32.

mein my Hort, Help, mein my

mein my Hort, Help, mein my

mein my Hort, Help,

The litui accompany chorale line 2.

C minor

B-flat major

C(7)

F major

F7

G minor

(C7)

Ascending diatonic fourth (for significance, see note).

37.

Trost, Strength, mein' my Zu - ver - of

Trost, Strength, mein' my Zu - ver - of

mein my Hort, Help, mein my Trost, Strength, mein' my Zu - ver - of

mein my Hort, Help, mein my Trost, Strength, mein' my Zu - ver - of

F major F major

41.

sicht, Might, *Alto crosses above cantus firmus.*

sicht, mein Hort, mein' Trost, mein' Zu - ver - sicht, Might,  
Might, my Help, my Strength, my Rock of Might,

mein Hort, mein' Zu - ver - sicht,  
my Help, my Rock of Might,

sicht, mein Hort, mein Trost, mein' Zu - ver - sicht,  
Might, my Help, my Strength, my Rock of Might,

F(7) B-flat major F pedal...

Line 3 alludes to Psalm 119:19: I am a sojourner on earth (Luther 1545: Ich bin ein Gast auf Erden).

45.

In lines 3 & 4 the cantus firmus is prepared by the lower 3 parts with imitative counterpoint (much longer for line 4) derived from the chorale phrase.

auf on Er - den bin - ich am - I  
auf on Earth naught bin - ich am - I

auf on Er - den bin - ich am - I  
auf on Earth naught bin - ich am - I

The luti fall silent for the first part of chorale line 3.

F major F7 B-flat major G major

50.

auf on Er - den bin - ich am - I  
auf on Earth naught bin - ich am - I

bin - ich am - I nur ein Gast, nur ein Gast, auf Er - den  
am - I but a guest, but a guest, on Earth - naught

nur ein Gast, nur ein Gast, auf Er -  
but a guest, but a guest, on Earth -

auf on Er - den bin ich  
auf on Earth naught am I

C minor D7 G minor B-flat major



55.

ich nur ein Gast,  
*I but a guest,*

bin ich nur ein Gast, auf Er - den bin ich nur ein  
*am I but a guest, on Earth naught am I but a*

- den bin ich nur ein Gast, ein Gast, auf Er - den  
*naught am I but a guest, a guest, on Earth naught*

nur ein Gast, auf Er - den bin ich nur ein  
*but a guest, on Earth naught am I but a*

55

D major C minor A-flat major C7 F minor

60.

Gast, bin ich nur ein Gast,  
*guest, am I but a guest,*

bin ich, bin ich nur ein Gast,  
*am I, am I but a guest,*

Gast, bin ich nur ein Gast,  
*guest, am I but a guest,*

30

F minor F major F7 B-flat major C7

65.

65

F(7) B-flat major G7 C minor F7 B-flat major

Line 4 alludes to Psalm 38:4: My iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me (Luther 1545: Meine Sünden gehen über mein Haupt, wie eine schwere Last sind sie mir zu schwer worden).

70.

The fore-imitation for this chorale phrase is much longer, giving it considerably greater weight.

drückt mich sehr der Sünden  
Sin's great bur - - - den Sore op - - -

und drückt mich sehr der  
By Sin's great bur - - - - - den

The litui fall silent in the fore-imitation to chorale line 4, but then re-enter intermittently with the cantus firmus.

70

B-flat major C7 D7 G minor C7 F major F7

74.

B-flat major C major F major F7 B-flat major F# dim.7

Martin Petzoldt suggests that, by withholding the entrance of the luiti until the cantus firmus is heard, Bach here modifies their symbolic significance (with their repeated notes) to represent and emphasize the burden of sin referenced in the text. See *Bach Kommentar* 3:577.

78.

G minor F major F7 B-flat major G7

Ascending chromatic fourth, signifying the building pressure of sin's burden. For more, see note.





82.

sehr der Sün - - - - den  
*bur - - - - - den* *Sore* *op - - - - -*

sehr der Sün - - den Last, und drückt  
*bur - - - den* *Sore* *op - - -* *- pressed,* *by Sin's* *by Sin's*

- - den Last, und drückt mich sehr der Sün - den  
*- op - - pressed,* *by Sin's* *great bur - - - den - Sore op -*

Sün - - - - den Last, und drückt mich sehr der  
*Sore* *op - - pressed,* *by Sin's* *great bur - - - den*

Ascending chromatic fourth in bass (see note above).

A minor B-flat major D7 E-flat major C7 F major D(7)

86.

Last, pressed.  
*pressed.*

- mich sehr der Sün - - den Last, der Sün - den Last.  
*great bur - den* *Sore - op - pressed,* *yea, Sore op - pressed.*

Last, der Sün - - - - den Last.  
*pressed,* *yea, Sore* *op - - - - -*

Sün - - - - - den Last, der Sün - - den Last.  
*Sore* *op - - pressed, yea,* *Sore op - - pressed.*

G minor E-flat major B-flat major B-flat 7 E-flat major E-flat major

**dal segno ad libitum**  
 B-flat major, B-flat pedal...

Bach's "dal segno" marking suggests several stanzas of the chorale were sung.

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91

= m. 2. = m. 3. = m. 4. = m. 5. = m. 6.

B-flat major F7 B-flat major G7

96

= m. 7. = m. 8. = m. 9. = m. 10.

C7 F major F7 B-flat major (C7)

F pedal...

100

= m. 11. = m. 12. = m. 13. = m. 14.

F(7) B-flat 7 G7 C minor F7

104

= m. 15. = m. 16. = m. 17. = m. 18. = m. 19a.

B-flat major A-flat major B-flat 7 (E-flat major) E-flat major E dim.7 B-flat major B-flat major

C major