

Con Gioia
Program Notes
Bach Encounters Vivaldi
April 2026

Johann Sebastian Bach spent a considerable amount of time in Weimar (1708–1717) honing his skills as a composer of cantatas and, especially, solo organ works. Much of this music was performed exclusively in the so-called “Himmelsburg,” chapel in the Wilhelmsburg castle (See Con Gioia’s concert announcement postcard for a contemporary painting). Thus, we begin our notes by quoting an article¹ published by the Boulder Bach Festival regarding the history of this revered place of worship and also performance of works for organ solo.

“The Palace Church is Reconstructed”

In a joint interdisciplinary research project between The Liszt School of Music Weimar and the Bauhaus-University Weimar, architects, engineers and musicians, using a computer model, have spatially and acoustically reconstructed the Palace Church at Weimar’s Wilhelmsburg that is often referred to as the “Himmelsburg.”

Originally, Bach’s music was performed in an attic room high above the sanctuary, and this sound energy made its way down into the marble-walled nave via a large, rectangular opening in the ceiling. Worshippers described the resulting experience as being “heavenly.” During a fire in 1774, however, the sanctuary and its musicians’ gallery, including the organ that Bach had played from 1708 to 1717, were completely destroyed.

Today, historic building plans, the outer walls of the church and a painting depicting the interior are all that remind us of the Palace Church, but from these architect Florian Scharfe has been able to generate an interactive model of the entire church. Cyber-visitors can visit Bach’s former workplace in the musicians’ gallery and consider how space limitations forced choristers and orchestral musicians to stand shoulder-to-shoulder around a narrow walkway, while facing each other across the opening in the ceiling, during cantata performances.

Computer-assisted calculations by engineer Jörg Arnold indicate that acoustical conditions within the musicians’ gallery itself were not very reverberant and would have enhanced the accurate performance of Bach’s polyphony. Below, in the open volume above the pews and at Duke Wilhelm Ernst’s middle-level balcony at the rear of the church, listeners would have enjoyed a resonance more typical for a church, yet the finest details of the musicians’ performance would have remained audible. The sound quality at the side galleries, however, would have been much less distinct.

Because Bach created a large part of his most important organ works and cantatas for this architecturally unique space, the Palace Church is of special interest to musicians who wish to inform their own interpretations with an understanding of the specific details of Bach’s performance conditions. This seems especially appropriate as the text and musical language of *Himmelskönig, sei willkommen* (BWV 182), the first of the cantatas that Bach composed during his Weimar period, draws a parallel between its introductory theological theme and the lofty architecture of the Palace Church.”

– *Neue Musikzeitung* [no date].

Bach would have composed some 30 cantatas following his appointment as Concertmaster of the Weimar orchestra in 1714, but only 20 have been preserved there. Bach later adapted many of them for future performances, especially for services in Leipzig.

We present two movements from the cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*, BWV 12 to open our concert, since the *Sinfonia* expresses sentiments similar to that of Cantata BWV 21 which is presented at the opening of the second half of this program; both feature a highly expressive obbligato (solo) oboe accompanied by a string ensemble. In BWV 12, we encounter a second viola, since Bach, at that early time in Weimar was following French orchestral practice in ensembles,

¹ Published by the Boulder Bach Festival, which is a nationally recognized series of events celebrating the oeuvre of Johann Sebastian Bach.

later adopting the Italian models (which used only one viola) in the standard string group of two violins, viola, cello and violone. Here, we follow the *Sinfonia* with a highly expressive aria for bass, *Ich folge Christo nach*, also from BWV 12 and accompanied by two virtuoso violins and the basso continuo.

Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben, BWV 147 (Heart and mouth and deed and life)

Bach's famous chorale "Jesus bleibet meine Freude", from cantata "Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben" was first heard in its present configuration when the cantata was performed in Leipzig, on 2 July 1723, for the Feast of the Visitation. It was during Bach's first months as cantor and he reused music that he had to hand, as he often did. Bach had already written most of BWV 147 in 1716, as an advent cantata for the court chapel in Weimar, but it was only in Leipzig that he added the recitatives with instrumental accompaniment and the well-known chorale which commemorates Mary's visit to Elizabeth as narrated in the Gospel of Luke in the prescribed reading for the feast day. So Bach turned a concise cantata composed for Weimar (opening chorus, four arias and probably a simple closing chorale) into a big two-part cantata. For most of his Weimar cantatas Bach used texts by Salomo Frank, but not the later additions.

It was during Bach's first months as cantor and he reused music that he had at hand, as he often did. Bach had already written most of BWV 147 in 1716, as an advent cantata for the court chapel in Weimar, but it was only in Leipzig that he added the recitatives with instrumental accompaniment and the well-known chorale. It was expanded from 6-10 movements, with an unknown librettist. The aria for soprano with an obbligato virtuosic violin part can only be described as "heavenly." Bach often added a 4-part chorale to end a cantata and used one here in an instrumental work later transcribed for piano by Dame Myra Hess as "*Jesu Joy of Man's desiring.*" Leipzig Lutherans observed silence during Advent, and Bach adapted it to the feast of the Visitation. According to eminent Bach performer-scholar John Eliot Gardiner, Advent's message is supposed to be one of "repentance, faith, preparation and conversion.

The cantata ***Nun komm der Heiden Heiland, BWV 61 (Now come, Savior of the heathens)*** I begins with the first verse of the old church hymn *Veni redemptor gentium* in Luther's German translation of 1524. It is the main hymn of Advent in the Lutheran church. The cantata opens with a combination of a choral movement and a French Overture. The libretto by Erdmann Neumeister, **Aria # 3, *Komme Jesu, komme zu Deiner Kirche***, is for tenor, with unison violins and violas and basso continuo. It reaches a climax with the combination of plucked strings imitating Jesus knocking at the door. It is followed by the gentle soprano aria, no. 5, *Offne Dich, mein ganzes Herze* accompanied only by a cello. Bach dated the score 1714, the year of his appointment as Concertmaster. Gospel reference: Matthew: 21. 1-9. Jesus's entry into Jerusalem

Himmelskönig, sei willkommen, BWV 182 (King of Heaven, welcome), was one of the earliest cantatas composed by Bach following his appointment as concertmaster in Weimar (1714). The opening chorus portrays Jesus's entry into Jerusalem; likewise, it should be portrayed through its entry into our hearts. Gospel Matthew 21.1-9. The text probably is by Salomon Frank, the librettist Bach chose for almost all his works at this time and many beyond. In this early work, Bach included a recorder in the small ensemble, although not presented in this aria. The solo bass intones a line from Psalm 40 as an introduction to the aria with strings.

Der Himmel lacht, die Erde jubiliert, BWV 31 (Heaven Laughs, the Earth rejoices), is one of three known cantatas for the first day of Easter and originated in 1715 when Bach was promoted to Concertmaster. It was revived in Leipzig in 1724 and performed both in the Church of St. Nicolas in the morning and St. Thomas in the afternoon. Bach found the text in the collection entitled *Protestant Devotional Offering* published by Salomon Frank, who provided all the texts

of Bach's Weimar cantatas. Bach employs huge forces including three high trumpets that emphasize the journey to heaven (not presented here) and presents a concerto movement to introduce the work which announces that the "Creator lives." Bass, tenor and soprano each have an aria; nos. 2 to 4 celebrate the resurrection of Christ and the liberated humans and no. 4 to no. 6 celebrate the resurrection of Christ and the liberated human. The recitative expresses the act of a Christian who flees from the grave and wishes to be alive with Christ.

Bach worked uninterruptedly in Weimar [from 1708-1717] and would have studied Antonio Vivaldi's works in *L'Estro armonico*, op. 3, during that period, when one of his employers and students, the young Prince Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar, would have shown them to him after purchasing them in Amsterdam, which at that time was a popular city for the propagation of newly published works. (Johann Ernst soon thereafter was taken ill and never recovered, causing his death away from home and a mourning period in Weimar for several weeks)

Indeed, Bach transcribed Vivaldi's **Concerto for Two Violins in D minor**, Op. 3, No. 11 (RV 565), from *L'Estro armónico* (1711) into his own **Organ Concerto in D minor**, BWV 596, during his Weimar period (circa 1713–1714). Earlier attributed to the most talented of Bach's sons, Carl Phillip Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann, the work has now been identified as an original work by their father.

The final piece we present in this half of the program is the solo **Violin Concerto in D major**, **RV 230**. It has three movements, as was common in the period: Allegro -Larghetto-Allegro.

Intermission

Bach Cantata *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis (I had so much distress)*, BWV 21

Part 1

Sinfonia for, string ensemble, oboe obbligato, and basso continuo

The opening *Sinfonia*, with an obbligato oboe and violin, recalls that from BWV 12, with which we opened our program, and conveys a mood of suffering. The first Chorus is followed by a soprano aria with oboe obbligato, which conveys a mood of an operatic lament. A mood of suffering is clearly conveyed by the treatment of the individual instruments.

The tenor aria following laments the feeling of God abandoning him. The music includes sighing figures representing tears, followed by storms and waves of a troubled sea. The soul "sinking into the ground" is depicted by the voice presented in a very low register. The exuberant final chorus ending this part includes an unexpected and expressive oboe statement preceding the reentry of the voices that end with a hopeful major chord.

We present below the second part in greater detail to enhance the listener's appreciation of this unique work in Bach's cantata repertoire.

Part 2

(Following the sermon, presented in Leipzig in both main churches, St Nicolaus and St. Thomas):

It is interesting to know that the early version of the cantata did not include arias for the tenor and that the final aria for tenor was at first scored for soprano.

Aria for soprano and obbligato oboe: *Seufzer, Tränen, Kummer, Not*

[Recit.: *Wie hast du dich, mein Gott*]
 Aria for Tenor: *Bäche von gesalznen Zähren*
 [Chorus: Was betrübst du dich, meine Seele]
 Recitative for duet: soprano and bass: *Ach Jesu, meine Ruh*
 Duet for soprano and bass: *Komm Jesu, komm mein Jesu zu Deiner Kirche*
 [Chorus: *Sei nun wieder zufrieden*]
 Aria for Tenor and basso continuo: *Erfreue Dich*
 [Chorus: *Das Lamm das erwürget ist*]

Epistle: 1 Peter 5.6-11: ‘Cast all your cares upon him, for he cares for you.’

Gospel: Luke 15.1-10: The parables of the lost sheep and lost coin.

This cantata was first performed in Weimar on 17th June, the 3rd Sunday after Trinity in 1714 (serving also as a farewell to his student, the gravely ill Prince Johann Ernst). Bach performed it later in Halle and in Hamburg in the 1720s when he was seeking a position as organist, and much later in Leipzig. (Only the parts, without a score) were preserved in Berlin. It is in two parts and is the longest of Bach’s cantatas. Almost all choruses are based on Psalm texts.

Following the sermon, we encounter one of Bach’s most poignant arias for soprano with obbligato oboe, similar to that encountered in contemporary operas, and then the aria for tenor and a dialogue in a passionate recitative between the soprano (the Soul) and bass (Jesus). It leads to an ardent duet “Come my Jesus and replenish me.” Such exchanges are linked with the erotic love poetry of the “*Song of Songs*,” as can be found also in the Cantata “*Wachet auf*,” BWV 140. It is followed by a chorus leading to the final aria for tenor accompanied only by a continuo. The cantata ends with a chorus, “the lamb that was slain is worthy to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and glory.”

An early version of the cantata probably originated in 1713, written for the funeral of the wife of a high court official, on 8 October. The theme of the sermon for this service was psalm 94, verse 19, which is precisely the text of the opening chorus of Bach’s cantata. This early version consisted only of parts 2–6 and 9.

The final piece tonight is a tribute to Vivaldi and his obvious role in influencing Bach in his explorations of the genre of “concerto.”

Since the Venetian Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) is possibly the most favorite among Baroque composers and his *La Stagione, The Seasons*, op. 8, continues to dominate the popularity charts, we will add here only a few less well-known facts concerning his influence on J.S. Bach. (Internet sources provide further details of Vivaldi’s colorful life and works).

A collection of twelve concertos for multiple combinations of string instruments, Vivaldi’s “*L’Estro armonico*” (“Harmonic spirit”) were published in 1705 in Venice and republished in Amsterdam in ca.1712–1713 and it is in Hollande that Bach’s patron and student, Prince Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar, would have bought a copy of it on one of his regular visits to this European music publishing center and presented it to his teacher.

This gesture of generosity led to an earthquake-like effect in the spread of the genre of “Concerto” in Germany. We know that Bach would have studied these works prior to printing his own collection of 16 keyboard concertos, as well as some transpositions of Vivaldi’s works., e.g., the Concerto for Four Harpsichords, BWV 1065.

The “*L’Estro armonico*” presented us with an opportunity to perform today a work comprising three movements for a previously unexplored combination of three soloists, featuring

two violins, violoncello and the basso continuo. In the words of the British composer and eminent Oxford Don, Dr. William Hayes, “ in the eleventh of his first twelve concertos, Opus 3, he has given us a specimen of his capacity in solid composition ... in the others he piques himself upon a certain brilliance of all fancy and execution, in which he excelled all who went before him... (from *Remarks on Mr. Avison's Essay on Musical Expression*)

Vivaldi's ability to stun his audience with ever challenging rhythmic combinations coupled with lyrical and improvised melodic strands, cadenzas, and treatment of the string instruments will hopefully leave you exhilarated and wishing for more.

Here, it adds an element of bravura which we have chosen to present as a farewell to ***Bach Encounters Vivaldi***.

–PdeS (2026)