

**Five Bach Motets - Thursday, March 12, 2020**  
**Saint Luke's, New York**  
David Schulenberg (Wagner College, Staten Island)

Bach's motets have been popular concert choices for choirs and choral societies since the early nineteenth century. Yet they raise all sorts of issues for performers, scholars, and listeners. They are challenging to sing and to listen to, but at the same time constantly imaginative and expressive. They resemble works by other composers that are also called motets. Yet as with other types of music that Bach wrote, he actually created new types of compositions even while ostensibly writing conventional types.

The word *motet* can mean many types of music. For Bach's Italian contemporaries, such as Vivaldi, a motet was a cantata with a Latin text, sung during a church service by a virtuoso soloist with orchestral accompaniment. But Bach understood the motet as an older type of music that went back a century and a half to composers of the Renaissance, such as Palestrina. These motets also had Latin texts, but they were choral works that could be performed without instruments. We often are told that Baroque musicians such as Bach performed only their own works and other contemporary compositions. But in fact they studied and performed certain music of the past, albeit in somewhat modernized adaptations. Palestrina's masses, originally for unaccompanied voices and dating from the sixteenth century, were among the works that Bach studied, performed, and emulated nearly two hundred years later.

Nevertheless, when Bach, in 1723, became music director for the churches of Leipzig, his most important contributions were the cantatas that he wrote for Sunday services. These were elaborate compositions in an up-to-date style that included arias and other types of music for solo voices with orchestra. But almost every service began with a much simpler motet, with Latin words. This motet was not by Bach, although he was responsible for its performance too. The composers of these motets went back to the late Renaissance and the early Baroque. Bach chose these motets from a collection that was originally published in 1618 by one Erhard Bodenschatz (fig. 1).

Bodenschatz added organ accompaniments to the older works in his collection. That brought them into conformity with Baroque ideas of how to perform the "a cappella" choral works of the Renaissance. Figure 2 shows the organ part from one of these older motets, by the sixteenth-century Venetian composer Andrea Gabrieli. Bach might have used this work to open the service on Christmas Day. The illustration shows the bass line as it appears in Bodenschatz's organ part. The text, in Latin, addresses the shepherds on the night of the nativity: "Quem vidistis pastores" (Shepherds, what have you seen?). In [audio example 1](#), four voices sing these words, answered by a second choir also of four parts. *Audio examples are online; see the list on the last page.*

This recording is of Andrea Gabrieli's original setting, for voices alone without organ. Even in the sixteenth century, however, it is possible that Gabrieli, himself an organist, would have played along with the voices. This is certainly how Bach would have understood Gabrieli's motet and very likely his own motets as well. These were written in imitation of Renaissance motets, and therefore they lack designated instrumental parts. But we know that Bach performed them at least sometimes with not only organ but other instruments doubling the voices.

Growing up in the late seventeenth century in the city of Eisenach, Bach might well have sung motets from Bodenschatz's collection as a choirboy. He also must have heard or sung motets by older members of his own family, especially his older cousin Johann Christoph Bach, who was the town organist. In [audio example 2](#) we hear the opening of one of Christoph Bach's motets, with the words

Fig. 1. Erhard Bodenschatz, *Florilegium musici portensis*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1621), title page (from organ part)



Fig. 2. Andrea Gabrieli, *Quem vidistis pastores* for eight voices, originally published Venice, 1587; first page of organ part from Bodenschatz, *Florilegium musici portensis*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1618)

LIII. Andreas Gabriel, 8. VOCCUM.

Veni vidi- stis pastores, ij quem vidistis pastores, dice-  
te, ij ij annunciate nobis, di- cite, annun- ciate  
nobis, Dicite annunciate nobis, in terris qs apparu-  
it, ij dicite annunciate nobis in terris, quis apparuit,  
Natum vidimus, vidimus, & choro Angelorum: Collaudantes Domini-  
Natum vidimus, ij ij vidimus,  
& choro angelo- rum, Collau- dantes Domi- num,  
& choro angelorum, collaudantes Dominum, ij Alle-

“Lieber Herr Gott, wecke uns auf” (Dear Lord God, wake us up).

Many years later, our Bach would describe Johann Christoph Bach as a “profound” composer. At the end of his life, he arranged this very motet for performance at his own funeral. The style of this music, then close to a century old, is best known today from the works of Heinrich Schütz. But even when newly composed the music was conservative, avoiding soloistic writing for individual vocalists. Instead the composer proceeds line by line through the text, just as Renaissance composers such as Andrea Gabrieli had done. Each line or phrase receives a choral setting that tries to catch a notable word or the expressive mood in the phrase, speeding up with the words “wake us up.”

Musical styles were changing as Bach grew up. The rather solemn style of Schütz and Christoph Bach was being displaced by more lively, soloistic types of vocal music based on Italian opera. Bach’s motets remain conservative by comparison to his other music, but they are more sophisticated and demand more from both the performers and the listeners than the music I’ve described so far. For the singers, a program like tonight’s is as demanding as an evening of virtuoso opera arias. Bach would never have expected a choir to sing more than one of his motets at a time—or an audience to listen to them.

What may be Bach’s earliest motet is one of the works on our program, “Ich lasse dich nicht.” There is some uncertainty, however, as to whether this is really by Bach. This is why the Bach catalog number, 159, is preceded by the abbreviation *Anh.* That stands for the German word *Anhang*, meaning appendix. Bach’s manuscript score of this work, begun by himself and completed by a pupil, does not name Bach as the composer (fig. 3). Nor does the manuscript indicate the occasion for which Bach composed or copied this work. But the manuscript dates from about 1712, when Bach was serving as organist to the dukes of Weimar. Most Bach scholars now accept this as a work by Bach, and we can imagine him leading a performance of it for the ruling duke in the Weimar court chapel. This was an impressive architectural structure whose appearance is known from a contemporary painting (fig. 4).

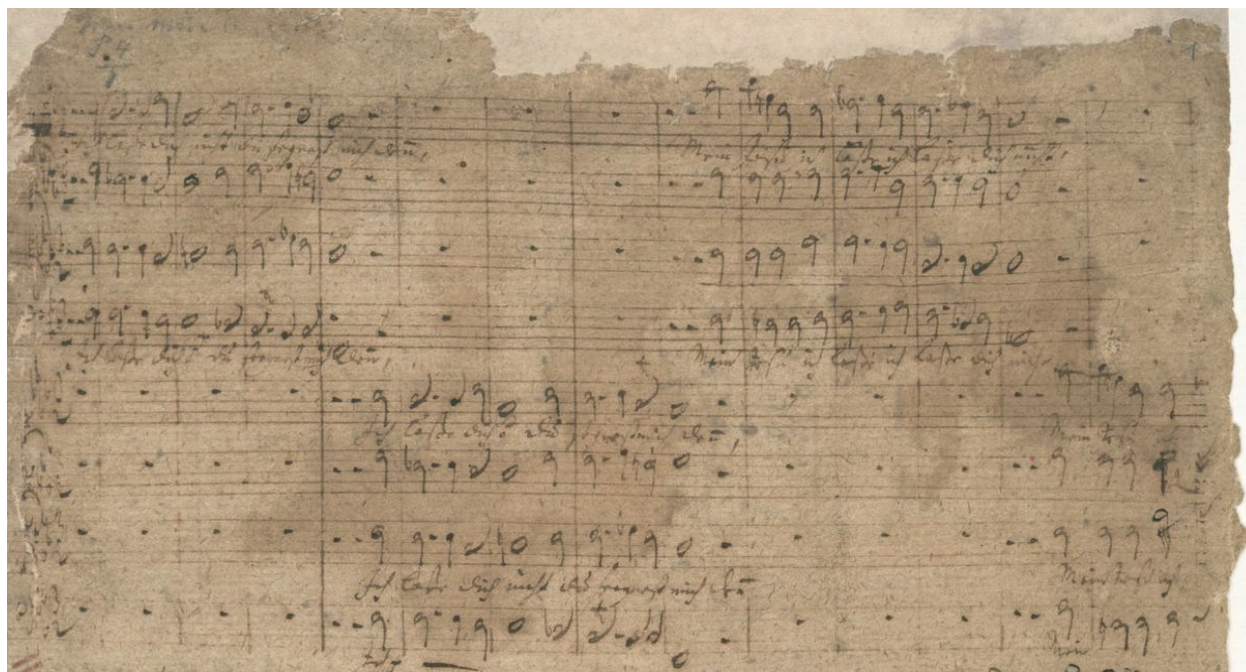
Bach’s motet has only a very brief text, a single verse from the book of Genesis which is then given a Christian paraphrase:

Ich lasse dich nicht, du segnest mich denn, Mein Jesu, ich lasse dich nicht, du segnest mich denn!	I will not let you go until you bless me, My Jesus, I will not let you go, bless me!
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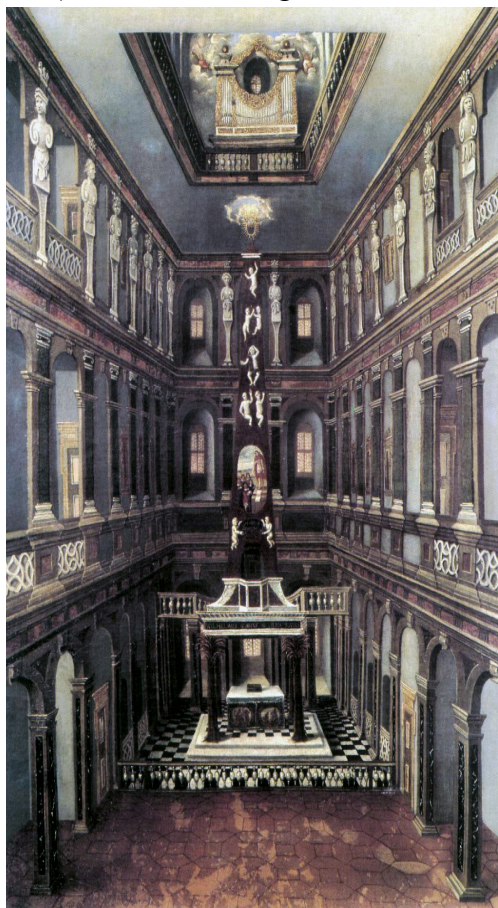
Lutherans usually associated this verse with funerals, but it seems to have had special meaning for the ruling duke of Weimar. In 1713, Duke Wilhelm Ernst had a new church dedicated in his city. The verse from Genesis was the basis of a sermon given on that occasion by the court preacher. Within the motet, we hear that verse constantly exchanged between the two groups of four voices each. It is possible, then, that Bach was echoing the words of the sermon ([audio example 3](#)).

Bach left Weimar in 1717. Six years later, in 1723, he came to Leipzig, where he would remain for the rest of his life. At Leipzig, Bach served as both director of church music and as cantor of the St. Thomas School. A contemporary view shows the St. Thomas Church; the school is the building to the left (fig. 5). Today we think of a cantor as a musician, which is indeed what the word originally meant. But for Bach, being cantor meant that he was a teacher, responsible for training the schoolboys not only in music but in Latin. The best musicians among the students would have assisted in performances not just at the St. Thomas Church but at three other churches whose music Bach also directed.

**Fig. 3.** Johann Sebastian Bach (?), *Ich lasse dich nicht*, BWV Anh. 159, manuscript score begun by Bach, completed by his pupil David Kräuter, ca. 1712 (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. Bach P 4/1)



**Fig. 4.** Interior of the Weimar court chapel, known as the Himmelsburg (no longer extant); oil on canvas by Christian Richter (ca. 1660), Klassik Stiftung Weimar



**Fig. 5.** Leipzig, St. Thomas Church, with St. Thomas School building (no longer extant), engraving by Johann Gottfried Krügener, facing title page in *Ordnung der Schule zu S. Thomae* (Leipzig, 1723)



  
**G. G. Hochw. Raths**  
**der Stadt Leipzig**  
**Ordnung**  
**Der Schule**  
**zu S. THOMÆ.**

Gedruckt bey Zimmanuel Liegen, 1723.

Bach wrote some 150 church cantatas during more than a quarter century at Leipzig. But he also composed or arranged a dozen or so motets. They are listed in table 1 below, although only the first six works are usually counted as motets today. A few movements from the cantatas could also be considered motets, or in the style of a motet. Unlike Bach's cantatas, his motets were not composed for regular church services but probably on commission, for special occasions. At least one of these motets was for the funeral of a wealthy Leipzig citizen, but these works were probably heard on other occasions as well. Bach himself was greeted by a composition of some sort, possibly a motet, sung by students when he was inducted into his new position at the St. Thomas School in 1723. Lacking independent instrumental parts, a motet could not incorporate the recitatives, solo arias, and other types of music found in Bach's cantatas. Yet his motets are not entirely archaic in style either. Each has a unique, imaginatively crafted plan that distinguishes it from older works.

For instance, the motet *Der Geist hilft* takes the form of a prelude and fugue, better known from Bach's keyboard music. We know when Bach wrote this particular motet because he indicated in his manuscript score that it was written for the funeral of Johann Heinrich Ernesti in 1729 (fig. 6). Ernesti was the rector of the St. Thomas School and therefore Bach's superior in the school hierarchy. The two had been on good terms, but Bach would subsequently find himself at odds with the school and church administration. This is probably one reason why, after 1729, Bach wrote fewer and fewer sacred works, turning his energy in other directions.

**Table 1.** The Bach Motets

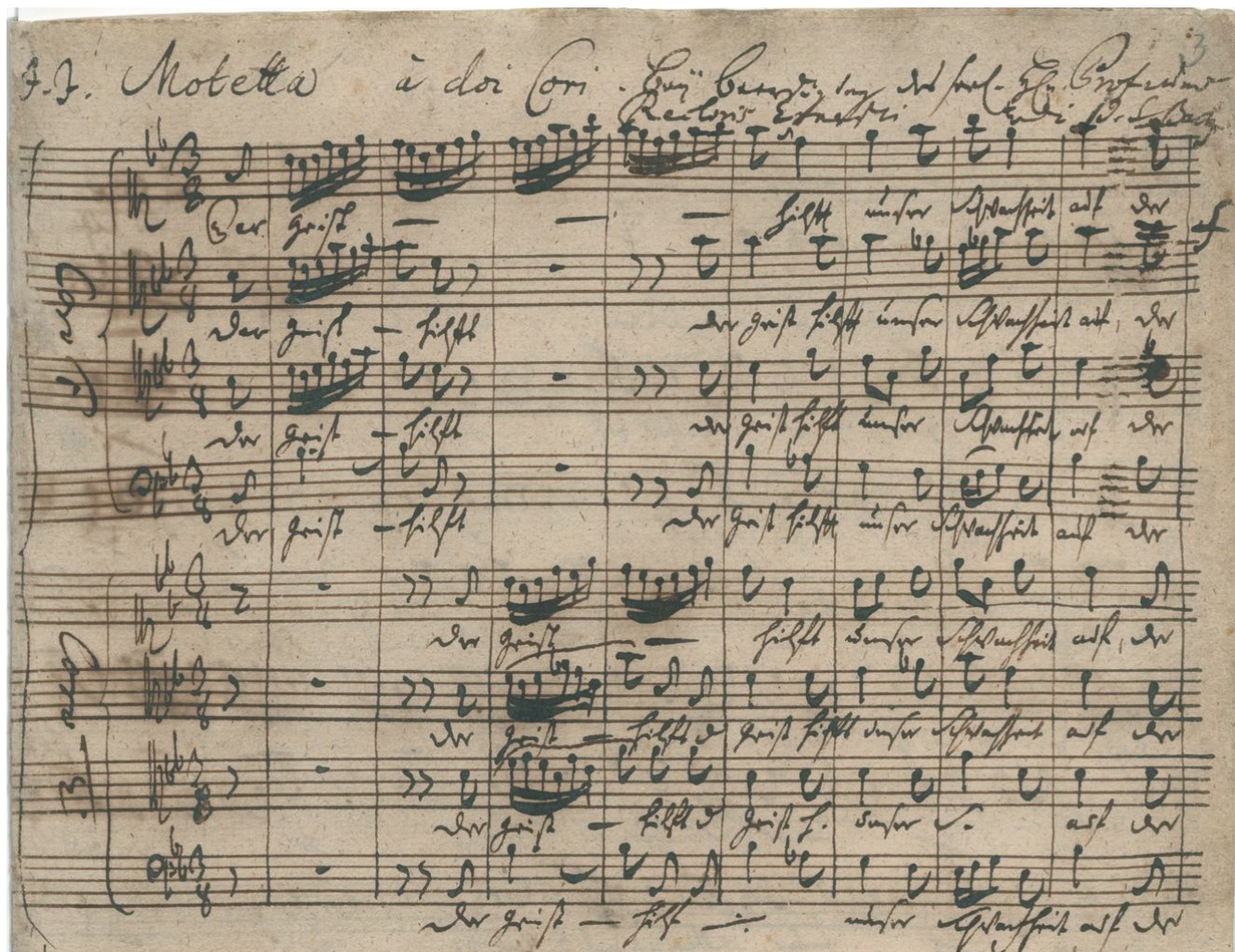
<u>BWV</u>	<u>date</u>	<u>voices</u>	<u>text (source or author)</u>	<u>design</u>
Anh. 159	1712?	8	Ich lasse dich nicht (Gen. 32:26) (I shall not let you go)	through-composed (followed by chorale?)
228*	pre-1717?	8	Fürchte dich nicht (Is. verses + chorale) (Fear not)	through-composed with reprise
225	1726–27	8	Singet dem Herrn (Ps. verses + chorale) (Sing to the Lord)	“prelude and fugue”—chorale aria—“prelude and fugue”
226	1729	8	Der Geist hilft (Rom. 8:26–27) (The Spirit helps)	“prelude and fugue” (followed by chorale?)
227	pre-1723?	5	Jesu, meine Freude (chorale + Rom. 8) (Jesus, my friend)	chorale variations alternating with bible verses
229	pre-1732	8	Komm, Jesu, komm (Thymich) (Come, Jesus, come)	through-composed strophic aria
<hr/>				
231*	after 1725	4	Sei Lob und Preis (Gramann) (Let there be praise and honor)	chorale fantasia (arrangement not by Bach?)
51*	by 1730	1+	Jauchzet Gott (anon.) (Praise God)	four movements (plus final Alleluia), resembling a solo cantata
118*	ca. 1736	4+	O Jesu Christ, meins Lebens Licht (O Jesus Christ, light of my life)	chorale fantasia
BC C8*	**	5	Der Gerechte kömmt um (Is. 57:1–2) (The just man dies)	through-composed (arrangement of motet by Kuhnau)
230*	**	4+	Lobet den Herrn (Ps. 117: 1–2) (Praise the Lord)	through-composed (essentially three fugues, including the final Alleluia)
50*	**	8+	Nun ist das Heil (Rev. 12:10) (Now is salvation)	fugue

\*not on tonight's program

\*\*Bach's authorship and date uncertain

+includes independent instrumental part(s)

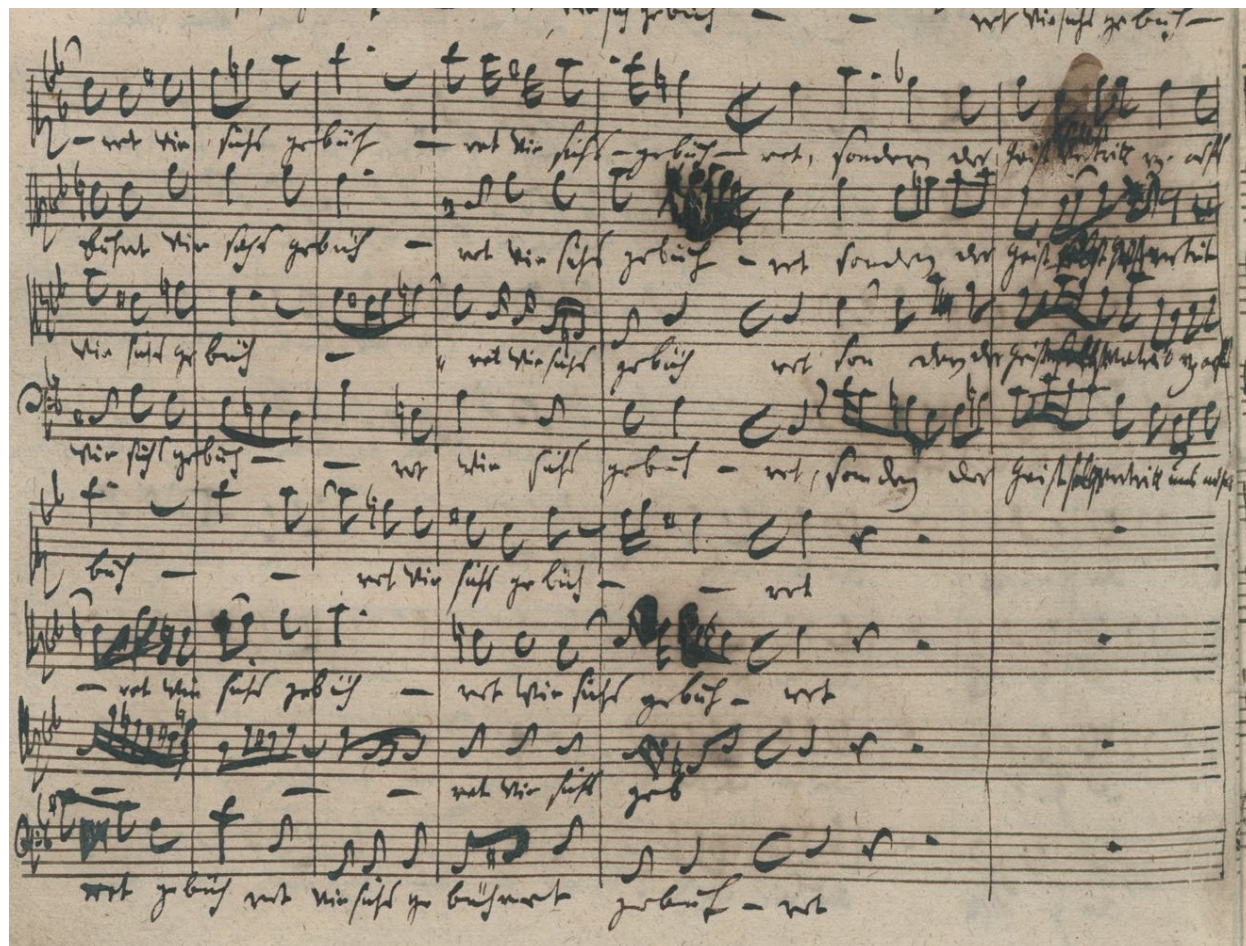
Fig. 6. J. S. Bach, *Der Geist hilft*, BWV 226, autograph manuscript score, 1729 (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. Bach P 36/1), opening



Even before 1729, Bach's pace of composing had trailed off, and this particular motet was not entirely new. The first page of Bach's manuscript score is remarkably neat, suggesting that it was copied from an older draft. The top line contains a single alteration, where Bach carefully rewrote the last note following an erasure. [Audio example 4](#) illustrates what the passage sounds like.

If we turn a few pages onward in the manuscript, however, we discover a messier page (fig. 7). We see a number of corrections, which Bach made by blotting out some of the notes he had written, before the ink had dried. Here Bach switched from copying to active composing. The switch did not begin at a random point, for at this moment the singers move from the first clause in the text to the second. At the same time, the musical style changes, from something resembling an aria to something closer to a fugue, as illustrated in [audio example 5](#).

Fig. 7. J. S. Bach, *Der Geist hilft*, BWV 226, autograph manuscript score, 1729 (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. Bach P 36/1), transition to first fugue



A fugue is a composition built from a single melody, or subject, which is shared at different times by all the members of the ensemble. Initially we hear the fugue subject sung by the first soprano, then by the second soprano, the basses, and so forth. The change in musical style, together with the change in Bach's handwriting, suggests that Bach initially intended to use an existing composition as his memorial for Rector Ernesti. After starting to copy the older work, however, Bach switched to composing something new, or at least heavily revising as he continued to write. What we know as a single motet might have been made up of movements or sections composed at different times.

Bach's own manuscript scores do not survive for most of the other Leipzig motets. Therefore we can say little about their compositional history, nor about their exact dates or why they were written. Even if, like the motet for Ernesti, they were all composed for funeral services, they were not necessarily expressions of grief. A funeral motet was meant to provide solace, even a glimpse of the joy that believers hoped that the departed was already experiencing. Bach accomplished this through musical settings of passages taken mainly from the bible and from the traditional hymns of the Lutheran church. Bach did not necessarily select these texts himself; they could have been chosen by the pastor or by relatives of the deceased. The deceased himself or herself might have chosen the words, if any of these works were commissioned before death.



Such was the case for a comparable work by Bach's predecessor Heinrich Schütz. Schütz's *Musicalische Exequien* was written for the funeral of a nobleman who, prior to death, laid out carefully selected texts for the composer. Like that work, most of Bach's Leipzig motets combine bible verses with chorale poetry. Bach finds ingenious musical ways of mingling or juxtaposing the two types of text. Both are set out in ways that are very elaborate but very beautiful, and also very logical or rational.

For instance, the motet *Jesu, meine Freude* alternates between six stanzas of a chorale and five verses from the Epistle to the Romans:

<u>mvt.</u>	<u>type</u>	<u>scoring</u>	<u>key</u>	<u>text</u>
1	chorale (stanza 1)	SATB	e	Jesu, meine Freude (Jesus my joy, chorale text by Johann Franck)
2	quintet	SSATB	e	Es ist nun nichts (There is nothing, Rom. 8:1, 4)
3	chorale (stanza 2)	SSATB	e	Unter deinem Schirmen (Under your protection)
4	trio	SSA	e -> b	Denn das Gesetz (For the law, Rom. 8:2)
5	chorale (stanza 3)	SSATB	-> e	Trotz dem alten Drache (Despite the old serpent): freely elaborated version of melody in S1 part
6	fugue	SSATB	G -> b	Ihr aber seid nicht fleischlich (But you are not of the flesh, Rom. 8:9)
7	chorale (stanza 4)	SATB	e	Weg mit allen Schätzen (Away with other treasures)
8	trio	ATB	C -> a	So aber Christus in euch ist (If Christ is in you, Rom 8:10)
9	chorale (stanza 5)	SSAT	C	Gute Nacht (Good night): melody in A part
10	quintet	SSATB	e	So nun der Geist (If now the spirit, Rom. 8:11): opens with same music as no. 2
11	chorale (stanza 6)	SATB	e	Weicht, ihr Trauergeiste (Yield, you mournful souls): same music as no. 1

The motet begins with a simple presentation of the chorale or hymn that goes by the same title, illustrated by [audio example 6](#). Here Bach presents the chorale melody in the relatively simple type of arrangement still used today for church hymns. But the chorale poem has six stanzas, and several of these receive more elaborate treatment. [Audio example 7](#) offers the beginning of the third stanza; you will hardly recognize the melody in the first soprano part.

Alternating with these chorale stanzas are the New Testament verses. These are set in various ways but always distinct from the chorale stanzas. Two of these verses are for just three voices, as illustrated in [audio example 8](#). The alternation of chorale and bible verses creates a highly symmetrical arrangement (see above). At the center is a setting of New Testament verses which describe the antithesis between "flesh" and "spirit." This antithesis is represented by a musical form which Bach would have described as a double fugue. The first clause of the text is represented by one musical theme, or subject, which emphasizes the word *fleischlich*, meaning of the body or the flesh. This is followed by a second subject for the second clause of the text. This subject has a lively series of notes, called a melisma, on the word *geistlich* or "spiritual." Together these subjects sound as in [audio example 9](#).

This fugue is the longest and most complex of the eleven movements. By placing it at the center of the motet, Bach underscores the significance of its text. He also makes the symmetry of the work as a whole readily audible: the last two movements repeat music heard at the beginning of the work. Its easily understood structure is one reason this motet is probably the best known of them all. But Bach was never content to repeat himself, and no other motet by him follows this plan.

Only one other motet is even partially symmetrical in the same way. This is the motet *Singet dem Herrn*, which opens and closes with movements based on Psalms 149 and 150, from the Hebrew Bible. In the middle comes a section whose words are taken from a German chorale:

<u>mvt.</u>	<u>type</u>	<u>scoring</u>	<u>key</u>	<u>text</u>
1	prelude fugue	SATB x 2	Bb	Singet dem Herrn (Sing to the Lord, Ps. 149:1–2) Die Kinder Zion (The children of Zion, Ps. 149:3)
2	chorale-aria	SATB / SATB	Bb	Chorale: Wie sich ein Vat'r erbarmet (As a father shows mercy, Johann Gramann) / Aria: Gott nimm dich ferner auf (God, take up our part, anonymous)
3	prelude fugue	SATB x 2 SATB	Bb	Lobet den Herrn (Praise the Lord, Ps. 150:2) Alles was Odem hat (All that have breath, Ps. 150:6)

The contrasting types of texts are again reflected in two very different musical approaches. The inner section opens with four voices singing the chorale melody, in the traditional hymn style ([audio example 10a](#)). The four other voices answer this with music also based on German poetry; Bach designates this as an aria, setting it in a somewhat freer style ([audio example 10b](#)). The two four-voice choirs continue to alternate in this way ([audio example 10c](#)).

The two outer sections of this motet are completely different. Each takes the form of a prelude and fugue, a design that Bach often used for bible verses. The motet begins like this, with the words “Singet dem Herrn” (Sing to the Lord) ([audio example 11](#)). But then the words turn to “Die Kinder Zion sei’n fröhlich” (The children of Zion will rejoice). Here the first soprano introduces a lively new melody. This becomes a fugue subject, imitated in turn by the other voices ([audio example 12](#)).

Fugue was perhaps Bach’s favorite musical form, yet in what may have been his last motet he composed a relatively simple work that is also in some ways old-fashioned. The motet *Komm, Jesu, komm* is thought to date from the early 1730s. Like *Der Geist hilft*, it has a connection to the St. Thomas School. Its text is a poem originally written for the funeral of a former rector. Jacob Thomasius had died at Leipzig in 1684, and the poem written for his funeral is by Paul Thymich, who also taught at the St. Thomas School. Bach is likely to have known the lovely setting of this poem by Johann Schelle, one of Bach’s predecessors as cantor at Leipzig ([audio example 13](#)).

Bach’s motet is far longer, although most of it is taken up by the first of the text’s two stanzas. Bach gives the second stanza a short, simple setting, as if it were a concluding chorale ([audio example 14](#)). The first (main) part of the motet treats each of the poem’s six lines at length; it is designed like a Renaissance madrigal: each line of the text is set as a self-contained double chorus setting. Almost half of this section, however, is taken up by repetitions of the last line of the stanza, “You are the right way, the truth and the life” ([audio example 15](#)).

Clearly Bach meant to emphasize these words. He probably did so having in mind not only the listeners but the singers, most of whom must have been his students. This reminds us that Bach's motets had special meaning for the students and teachers of the school with which Bach was associated for the last quarter century of his life. For them, there was no contradiction between learned fugue and deep expression, between reason and feeling. The two served the same ends, and this principle was taken for granted in the Lutheran community of which Bach was a central part. No one today would subscribe to all the doctrines taught by Bach or in his school. Yet this does not prevent us from appreciating both the ingenuity and the beauty of the music we are about to hear.

**Audio examples** (performers' names in parentheses). Online at <https://faculty.wagner.edu/david-schulenberg/five-bach-motets/>

1. Andrea Gabrieli, *Quem vidistis pastores*, opening (Chanticleer)
2. Johann Christoph Bach, *Lieber Herr Gott, wecke uns auf*, opening (Cantus Cölln)
3. Johann Sebastian Bach (?), *Ich lasse dich nicht*, BWV Anh. 159, opening (Cantus Cölln)
4. J. S. Bach, *Der Geist hilft*, BWV 226, opening (Trinity College Choir, Cambridge, U.K.)
5. J. S. Bach, *Der Geist hilft*, BWV 226, transition to first fugue (Trinity College Choir, Cambridge, U.K.)
6. J. S. Bach, *Jesu, meine Freude*, BWV 227, mvt. 1 (chorale, stanza 1), opening (Cantus Cölln)
7. J. S. Bach, *Jesu, meine Freude*, BWV 227, mvt. 5 (chorale, stanza 3), opening (Cantus Cölln)
8. J. S. Bach, *Jesu, meine Freude*, BWV 227, mvt. 4 (trio), opening (Cantus Cölln)
9. J. S. Bach, *Jesu, meine Freude*, BWV 227, mvt. 6 (fugue), opening (Cantus Cölln)
- 10a. J. S. Bach, *Singet dem Herrn*, BWV 225, beginning of chorale from inner section (Cantus Cölln)
- 10b. J. S. Bach, *Singet dem Herrn*, BWV 225, “aria” from inner section (Cantus Cölln)
- 10c. J. S. Bach, *Singet dem Herrn*, BWV 225, 2d phrase of chorale followed by “aria” from inner section (Cantus Cölln)
11. J. S. Bach, *Singet dem Herrn*, BWV 225, opening (Cantus Cölln)
12. J. S. Bach, *Singet dem Herrn*, BWV 225, fugue from first section (Cantus Cölln)
13. Johann Schelle, *Komm, Jesu, komm*, opening (Memorial Church Choir, Harvard University)
14. J. S. Bach, *Komm, Jesu, komm*, BWV 229, mvt. 2, opening (Cantus Cölln)
15. J. S. Bach, *Komm, Jesu, komm*, BWV 229, mvt. 1, line 6 (Cantus Cölln)