

# The Great Eighteen Organ Chorales

*Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)*

## Program

Organist: Christopher Jacobson

November 8, 2020

**Fantasia super Komm, Heiliger Geist, BWV 651** (*Come, Holy Ghost*)

**Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott, BWV 652**

**An Wasserflüssen Babylon, BWV 653** (*By the waters of Babylon*)

**Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele, BWV 654** (*Adorn thyself, O dear soul*)

**Trio super Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend, BWV 655** (*Lord Jesus Christ, turn to us*)

**O Lamm Gottes unschuldig, BWV 656** (*O spotless Lamb of God*)

**Nun danket alle Gott, BWV 657** (*Now thank we all our God*)

**Von Gott will ich nicht lassen, BWV 658** (*From God I will not leave*)

**Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland, BWV 659** (*Savior of the Nations come*)

**Trio super Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland, BWV 660**

**Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland, BWV 661**

**Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr, BWV 662** (*Alone to God on high be glory*)

**Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr, BWV 663**

**Trio super Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr, BWV 664**

**Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, BWV 665** (*Jesus Christ, our Savior*)

**Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, BWV 666**

**Komm, Gott Schöpfer, Heiliger Geist, BWV 667** (*Come, God the Creator, Holy Ghost*)

**Vor deinen Thron tret ich, BWV 668** (*Before thy throne I now appear*)

*Performed on the Benjamin N. Duke Memorial Organ*

# Program Notes

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When J. S. Bach arrived in Leipzig to take up the post of Cantor at St. Thomas Church, he had not written any organ music for some time, and it seemed unlikely that he would do so again in a concentrated way. Years earlier in Weimar, Duke Wilhelm Ernst had encouraged him to produce vast quantities of organ music: innovative concerto transcriptions, ground-breaking preludes and fugues, and a wide variety of chorale preludes including the approximately forty pieces in the *Orgelbüchlein*. With all these marvelous pieces Bach brought organ music to new heights of artistic prowess.

During the intervening six years as capellmeister in Cöthen (1717–1723) Bach was responsible for writing secular cantatas and chamber music which preoccupied his time and compositional energies. His output of organ music waned so much that it consisted of a small handful of incomplete pieces, the Prelude and Fugue in C major (9/8), BWV 547, and sketches of the six Trio Sonatas.

When he arrived in Leipzig Bach continued to neglect organ music for the first several years. He was responsible for writing sacred cantatas for St. Thomas and St. Nikolaus churches, and he did so with such ardent zeal that he was producing one cantata per week for the liturgical calendar. However, after amassing nearly four yearly cycles of sacred cantatas Bach suddenly began turning his energies to writing chamber music and studying and learning from Renaissance vocal music. At this juncture in 1728 he also renewed his interest in writing organ music penning some of his finest compositions—three monumental free works: Prelude and Fugue in B minor, BWV 544, Prelude and Fugue in E minor, BWV 548 (“Wedge”), and the Prelude and Fugue in C minor, BWV 546. Toward the end of the 1730s Bach turned his energies toward collecting and publishing his compositions over the next decade: Clavierübung III, the Canonic Variations on “Vom Himmel hoch” and the “Six Schübler Chorales.” Around 1740 Bach began assembling and revising a group of chorales dating back to his time in Weimar which has become known generally today as the Great Eighteen Organ Chorales. Over the course of the last ten years of his life he perfected these pieces adding the last work, *Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit* just before his death in July 1750.

Bach’s desire to collect, revise, and perfect The Great Eighteen Organ Chorales in the 1740s likely points to taking stock of his musical library, intending to assemble individual pieces into a cohesive group with the intent of leaving a strong musical legacy. The manuscript of first fifteen chorales (along with a revision of the Canonic Variations on “Vom Himmel hoch”) survives in Bach’s hand. However, the sixteenth and seventeenth chorales were written out by Johann Altnikol, Bach’s son-in-law, and the eighteenth chorale (*Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit*) by an unknown scribe.

The Leipzig Autograph (as these chorales are also known) shows Bach looking in the rearview mirror, back on his life’s work. In amassing these chorales he chiefly concerned himself with a wide variety of musical styles: six ornamented chorales, three trios, one chorale-fugue, five cantus firmus chorale fantasias, one chorale and variations, and two Pachelbel-like chorales. Such a broad swath in one collection shows a depth of formal reflection and theological commentary as if the spiritual meditations of the aging Bach had finally reached a final phase of evolution.

Just as Bach had organized his great Clavierübung III under the framework of the Holy Trinity, it is possible (though we will never know for certain) that Bach envisaged framing the Leipzig Chorales around the Holy Spirit. The first chorale prelude, a remarkable fantasia on *Komm, Heiliger Geist* (Come, Holy Ghost), BWV 651 is prefaced by the letters J.J. which in Latin stood for *Jesu juva* (Let Jesus help us!), a paraphrase of the

Gregorian plainsong, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. The last piece in the collection, *Komm, Gott, Schöpfer* presents a commentary on *Veni Creator Spiritus*, an ancient hymn invoking the Holy Spirit and thereby framing the close of the collection. In contrast to the opening fantasia the second chorale in the collection by the same name, *Komm, Heiliger Geist, BWV 652* is much more introspective and offers a clear paraphrase of the third stanza, “O holy ardor, sweet comfort.” In each of the nine phrases Bach writes in the old style of *vorimitation* by which imitative entries of the accompaniment voices precede the chorale entrances.

The next three chorale preludes lead one out of despair into hope. *An Wasserflüssen Babylon (By the Waters of Babylon), BWV 653* tells the story of the Jews in Babylonian captivity and their lamenting despair. Bach delicately embellishes the melody in the tenor voice against a slow, soulful sarabande dance in the accompaniment. The beautifully ornamented chorale *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele (Adorn thyself, my soul, with gladness), BWV 654* remains one of the most famous and sublime in all of Bach’s chorale preludes. The real beauty is in the accompaniment figures, themselves richly ornamented, supporting the flowing melody. Both Mendelssohn and Schumann were greatly moved by this chorale nearly one hundred years later during the nineteenth century Bach revival. The jubilant chorale trio, *Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend (Lord Jesus Christ, turn to us), BWV 655* closes this section leading the listener into pure joy and hope. Its swirling, jubilant figurations in the hands wonderfully set up the chorale tune stated in the pedals at the end of the piece.

The next three chorales express an unwavering trust in God. *O Lamm Gottes unschuldig (O Lamb of God innocently slain), BWV 656*, presents a musical rendition of the Lutheran Agnus Dei. Bach sets this as a series of three verses. The harmonies in the third verse poignantly express the text, “You have born all sin, otherwise you should have despaired,” through a shocking sequence of chromatic harmony. To close, Bach returns to clear tonality over the text, “Jesus, grant us thy peace.” For the chorale *Nun danket Alle Gott (Now thank we all our God), BWV 657* Bach turns to Johann Pachelbel’s chorales for his model: melody presented in long notes in the soprano while the accompaniment in the lower voices introduces fugato textures anticipating the melody itself. *Von Gott will ich nicht lassen (I will not abandon God), BWV 658*, set in the rare key of F minor (associated with tenderness and tranquility) harnesses with child-like innocence the Christian image of God. Bach sets the melody in the tenor voice sounding from within the flowing legato texture in the hands.

The chorale *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland (Come now, Savior of the Heathen)* forms an Advent trilogy in the next three chorales. In BWV 659 Bach ornaments the chorale considerably in the soprano, much like a sacred aria inspired by texts of adoration and supplication. Bach brilliantly hints at the melody in the alto and tenor accompaniment over a continuously “walking” bass line. The closing arabesque-type gesture represents a haunting turn of melody, almost as if paying homage to Christ through his sacrifice. Bach surprises and delights in BWV 660 with the most unusual trio texture with two bass lines: Soprano, Bass, Bass. Underneath the melody the two bass lines tumble and stumble over one another repeatedly crossing above and below as if to cyclically illustrate the fifth stanza of text, “His life began with the Father and led back to the Father.” BWV 661 presents a rousing conclusion to Bach’s Advent trilogy. As if to say “Amen!” (So be it!) Bach unmistakably showcases the full organ with the melody striding forth in the pedals to a celebratory finish.

Perhaps the most famous of all the chorales in the Leipzig Autograph are the three settings of *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr (Alone to God on high be glory)*. A paraphrase of the Lutheran Gloria this tune was a clear favorite of Bach’s as he set it for organ solo no less than ten times (more than any other chorale tune!). This particular set extols the Holy Trinity, and the first setting, BWV 662, is a clear representation of God the Father with its luxurious ornamented melody in the soprano voice (the part highest in the score and symbolically closest to God in heaven). The second setting, BWV 663, represents God the Son with the ornamented chorale sandwiched in the tenor voice. Musically this has been Jesus’ traditional place between heaven (sopra-



no voice) and earth (bass voice). The music is rich with symbolism of Jesus' time on earth, from Christ the King to Christ Crucified. BWV 664, a joyous and effervescent chorale trio, presents the finale to Bach's Gloria trilogy unmistakably as God the Holy Ghost. Luther's portrayal of the Holy Ghost assures that all humanity will share in the radiance of heavenly angels. Bach illustrates this perfectly with two heavenly voices tumbling over one another in exuberant joy above a simple bass line. Such is the joy heard here that the chorale tune itself only makes a brief, fleeting appearance at the end.

The next three chorales preludes bring the Leipzig Autograph to a close. They evoke the idea of deliverance from evil and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Bach presents the chorale paraphrase on *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland* (*Jesus Christ, our Savior*), BWV 665 in strict four-part counterpoint with the cantus firmus in the bass. Martin Luther's text for *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland* depicts the suffering of Christ during Holy Week, and musically consists of four distinct phrases. Bach's setting would have been played as congregations in Weimar and Leipzig received the bread and wine during Holy Communion allowing the music portraying Christ's bitter suffering to wash over them. To emphasize the intense anguish of Jesus during his crucifixion Bach writes chromatic scales ascending and descending to turbulent harmonic effect. The scene dramatically changes to resurrection joy as Bach suddenly writes the fastest notes of the piece (thirty-second notes) restoring tonality in a blinding blaze of E major. This second setting of *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland*, BWV 666 contrasts the first in every way, taking on an almost improvisational character. Under the title page Bach wrote, "alio modo" (in a different way). In this setting Bach appears most interested in developing musical ideas rather than matching text to music. The chorale melody is presented in the topmost voice as florid polyphony spins out in the lower parts. *Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, Heiliger Geist*, (*Come, God the Creator, Holy Ghost*), BWV 667 presents Luther's adaptation of the plainsong *Veni Creator Spiritus* and could very likely have been intended to bring the cycle to a symmetrical close. In the first variation Bach places the melody in the upper voice while the pedal punctuates the third beat, creating a primitive lopsided dance-like effect, commonly thought to represent the third member of the Trinity: God the Holy Ghost. In the second variation fast notes in seemingly endless scales soar through every measure like colossal gusts of Pentecost wind.

One chorale remains at the end of the collection copied by an anonymous scribe: *Vor deinen Thron tret ich* (*Before your throne I now appear*), BWV 668. In March 1750 Bach underwent an eye surgery that was ultimately unsuccessful leaving him completely blind. Centuries of legend have it that the now-blind Bach, sensing death, dictated the score to *Vor deinen Thron* (based on his Weimar chorale, "Wenn wir in höchstem Nöten sein"—When we are in the greatest distress) from his deathbed to a scribe. This manuscript, however, is entirely free of corrections, and a flawless dictation from a blind composer remembering a work he composed nearly thirty years earlier seems unlikely. Christoph Wolff instead suggests that at some stage in Bach's last few months, he asked a student to play his chorale "Wenn wir in höchstem Nöten sein." Bach then dictated a number of changes to the piece which a scribe copied into a lost manuscript. With his thoughts turned more and more toward heaven Bach renamed the piece "Before your throne I now appear," and requested its addition to the manuscript of the Great Eighteen Chorales. So the legend evolves, but the resulting piece has remained one of exceptional beauty, quiet, and meditative calm.

Christopher Jacobson

#### *Acknowledgements:*

Peter Williams, *The Organ Works of J. S. Bach* (Cambridge Studies in Music)

S. Sanford Terry, *Johann Sebastian Bach: A Biography* (Oxford University Press)

Russell Stinson, *J. S. Bach's Great Eighteen Organ Chorales* (Oxford University Press)

# Biography

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Duke University Chapel Organist and Organist at Duke Divinity School, Christopher Jacobson, FRCO, is active as a versatile concert organist, conductor, accompanist, guest clinician, and teacher. At Duke he founded and directs the Duke Evensong Singers in services and concerts, oversees the training of the Chapel's organ scholars, and plays the organ for over 150 services each year.

As a soloist, Mr. Jacobson has presented organ recitals across North America, Europe, and Australia. His recordings appear on the Dutch record label Pentatone Classics both as an organ soloist and accompanist. He has won top prizes in numerous organ competitions, including the National Young Artist Competition of the American Guild of Organists, the Miami International Organ Competition, and the John R. Rodland Competition in sacred music. In addition to maintaining an active recital schedule, he has presented performances of the complete organ works of Johann Sebastian Bach across the United States to critical acclaim.

An active ensemble performer Mr. Jacobson is in demand as an accompanist and continuo player. He is a 2017 Grammy-nominated organist for his work with conductor Brian A. Schmidt and the South Dakota Chorale in the world premiere recording of Marcel Tyberg's two Masses. His work as an accompanist has taken him all over the world working regularly with choirs and orchestras in the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Recent engagements have included performing and recording at Victoria Hall with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande in Geneva, Switzerland, and with early music ensembles including Three Notch'd Road in Charlottesville, Virginia.

One of the few Americans to hold the Fellowship Diploma from the Royal College of Organists (FRCO), Mr. Jacobson is in demand as conductor, organist, and adjudicator, and has led choirs on cathedral residencies in North America and England. Most recently he conducted the Duke Evensong Singers in choral residencies at Gloucester Cathedral and Westminster Abbey in July 2018.

Before moving to Duke Mr. Jacobson was previously Associate Organist and Choirmaster at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Columbia, South Carolina, and Assistant Organist and Assistant Director of Music at Washington National Cathedral where he assisted in the daily training of the choirs of Men and Boys and Men and Girls and playing the organ for numerous services including the State Funeral of President Gerald Ford.

Mr. Jacobson is a 2006 graduate of the Eastman School of Music where he earned the Master of Music degree in Organ Performance and the Sacred Music Diploma. He graduated with a Bachelor of Music degree with highest distinction in Organ Performance from St. Olaf College. His teachers and mentors have included David Higgs and William Porter at Eastman, and John Ferguson at St. Olaf. Mr. Jacobson is a graduate of Woodberry Forest and the American Boychoir School where he was a treble chorister under James Litton.

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