

“The King of Chorales”: *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*: J. S. Bach, J. C. F. Bach, Felix Mendelssohn

It might appear unlikely that a Lutheran hymn tune would possess a musical aesthetic beyond the scope of worship and liturgy. However, two hymns written by pastor and sixteenth-century “Meistersinger” Philipp Nicolai are superb chorale melodies that have been inspiring great composers for centuries. Besides *Wachet auf* (“Awake!”), Nicolai set *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* (“How brightly shines the morning star”), a hymn popular during Advent and Christmas. Like *Wachet auf*, this second tune was to become the basis of a cantata by J. S. Bach one hundred thirty years later. No other chorale melodies have been better loved.

Nicolai was pastor in the North Rhine-Westphalia town of Unna, where in 1597 nearly the entire population succumbed to plague. Regarding his own survival as divine intervention, he published the two tunes with spiritual reflections in a book, *Freudenspiegel des ewigen Lebens* (“Mirror of joy of eternal life”). The two tunes enjoyed great popularity throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Both make cryptic reference to dedicatees by providing acrostics with the starting letter of each verse. In *Wachet auf*, we have a reverse acrostic: **W** (“Wachet auf” – verse 1), **Z** (“Zion hört” – verse 2), and **G** (“Gloria” – verse 3) referring to **Graf Zu Waldeck**, the Unna count who was Nicolai’s pupil and who died in the plague at age fifteen. The other tune, *Wie schön leuchtet*, was dedicated to **Wilhelm Ernst Graf Und Herr Zu Waldeck**, where each stanza would begin with the initial letters of the count’s name and title.

Nicolai’s melody conformed to the seminal “bar form” structure in which a theme is heard twice (each called a “Stollen”) and is then followed by a longer section, the “Abgesang,” that provided both a contrast and closing reference to the Stollen. Thus, the structure of a “bar form” composition might be diagrammed as (A A)| B. The vast majority of chorale tunes demonstrate this form. Casting new melodies to existing poetry (liturgical or secular) was central to the art of the Meistersingers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The arcane compositional aesthetic behind chorale construction was made popular by the portrayal of cobbler-composer Hans Sachs in Richard Wagner’s opera *Die Meistersinger*. Wagner’s historical protagonist gives us a vivid account of bar form, albeit skewed to Wagner’s own musical exegesis. It is interesting, though, that Nicolai appropriated the last strophe of Hans Sachs’s tune *Silberweise* (“Silver tone”), incorporating it three times in *Wachet auf*: at the close of each Stollen and, as well, in the Abgesang. Between Nicolai’s time and the twentieth century are works by Bach, Prætorius, Scheidt, Kuhnau, Buxtehude, and Max Reger that celebrate the beauty and spirit of Nicolai’s melodies.

Johann Sebastian Bach’s setting of *Wachet auf*, S.140¹, was performed on the twenty-seventh Sunday after Trinity, November 25, 1731, well after the bulk of other so-called “chorale cantatas” that Bach wrote for the second liturgical year (1724-25) after assuming duties as Cantor at St. Thomas. The general procedure in such chorale cantatas was to base at least two movements on *both* the words *and* melody of a given hymn. The remaining movements could be freely composed, and would frequently paraphrase other verses of the chorale text. Some chorale cantatas, for example, *Christ lag in Todesbanden* (S.4), set each movement’s text and music on the given chorale. In the case of the latter, all of Luther’s verses are subsumed in Bach’s composition. However, such complete adherences are rare, and in most cases the unadorned tune (the *cantus firmus*) is woven in the contrapuntal texture of an elaborate opening movement, and once more in a plain four-part hymn in the last movement. Sometimes, as is the case of *Wachet auf*, the center movement becomes another *cantus-firmus* variation. In *Wachet auf*, the opening chorus is a breathtaking choral depiction of a procession in the stately regal style of a French overture. Ejaculatory “Wach aufs” and fleeting string figures recall some of the poem’s symbolism as a *Tageweise* (“Morning Song”); the trope of a castle guard’s horn alerting lovers in a midnight tryst for the coming morn is a symbolic call for the union of Jerusalem’s innocent virgins with Jesus as bridegroom. The contrapuntal ingenuity and rhythmic energy of this movement is a brilliant illumination of the text’s symbolic underpinnings. However, the setting of *Zion hört*, Nicolai’s second verse, has become the best-known music of this cantata. A lilting bridal dance is combined with the solemn *cantus firmus* in a slightly dissonant but completely captivating way. Bach later arranged this movement for organ solo in the *Schübler Chorales* of 1746, which became widely known throughout the eighteenth century. A simple, but joyous, four-part harmonization concludes the work.

Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach (1732-1795), the “Bückenburg Bach,” is the least known of J. S.’s musical progeny. Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel were sons of Bach’s first wife, Maria Barbara; Johann Christoph Friedrich and Johann Christian were sons of Bach’s second wife, Anna Magdalena. After being carefully tutored in music by his father, J. C. F. pursued a degree in law, but, when Sebastian’s health failed in 1750, this gifted teen made a more practical career move, becoming a musician at the court of Wilhelm, Graf zu Schaumburg-Lippe in Bückenburg. There, where Italian music was the vogue, J. C. F. developed a compositional style that attempted to integrate his Northern contrapuntal roots with the simpler textures and harmonies of the South. Later in his career, he was to visit his brother Johann Christian in London and ultimately was won over by the “new” music of Mozart and Gluck. The motet *Wachet auf* (HW XV/2) clearly demonstrates the hybrid of techniques and styles that distinguish this son’s music. The first verse, “*Wachet auf*,” is set in three sections. The opening triadic motif of Nicolai’s tune becomes the basis of an extended opening section, and is first treated homophonically, then polyphonically. In

¹ S.140 refers to Wolfgang Schmieder’s *Bach Werke Verzeichnes* (“BWV”), the catalog of J. S. Bach’s works. The BWV numbers (or “S” numbers) are not chronological but are categorical. (Vocal works first, organ works next, etc.) The first two hundred fifty numbers enumerate the cantatas in an arbitrary order. For example, S.141 was written seven years before S.140.

fleeting moments, the music bears a striking resemblance to his father's motets. In the second section, the *cantus firmus*, given to sopranos, is presented with *concertato* responses, again alternating in homophonic and polyphonic textures. The final section is an abbreviated return of opening triadic material. The second verse, the beautiful setting of "Zion hört," is predominantly inspired by the text: only hints of the chorale tune appear in this successful blend of Baroque and Pre-classical idioms. The expressive "Hosianna" – which does quote the chorale tune – and the word painting in "Wir folgen all zum Freudensaal" ("We follow all to the joyful hall") are very effective and memorable. The shape of the lines, and the contour of the harmonic progression are "modern," but the interlacing of voices and the focus on individual words harken back to his father's art. Much like the first verse, the final verse, "Gloria sei dir gesungen," is set in three sections. The verse begins with a lengthy anthem-like treatment, followed by a surprising tribute to the composer's father: a full quotation of setting of J. S. Bach's cantata movement (vii). Not wishing to merely end the work with this tribute, J. C. F. concludes with some fugal fun reiterating the Nicolai's last four ecstatic lines.

Felix Mendelssohn, the musical genius who almost single-handedly sparked the nineteenth-century revival of J. S. Bach, placed his musical "godfather" alongside Goethe as his greatest spiritual and artistic influence. In Mendelssohn's great oratorio *St. Paul*, he gives us a simple but grandiose setting of the first verse of Nicolai's hymn. Strings and woodwinds double the plain four-part harmonization while horns and trumpets add fanfare filigree at the end of each phrase. Only in the last two bars does Mendelssohn tamper with tradition by adding a familiar plagal "amen" cadence.

The Berkshire Bach Society (BBS) performed J. S. Bach's *Wachet auf* on May 14 and 15, 1994. The concert was conducted by Richard Westenburg, and BBS President and founder Simon Wainrib wrote program notes. In celebration of BBS's coming twentieth anniversary, and as a gesture of thanks to Simon, we reproduce his inimitably enthusiastic text below.

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Simon Wainrib's Commentary on J. S. Bach's *Wachet Auf*

CANTATA 140: "Sleepers, wake, a voice is calling." This is one of the few Bach cantatas that have reached relative popularity, in part because of its fourth movement, the tenor chorale, imbedded in its extraordinary string setting. The cantata itself is a chorale cantata, meaning that the whole work is built on the various verses of a chorale or church anthem. *Wachet auf* was one of those anthems, the three verses of which the unknown librettist used verbatim as texts for the work's opening chorus, its massive centerpiece (4th movement) and the final chorale. The intermediary movements are dramatic commentary on the anthem's message. That message is love, the tender bond that ties God to the human soul. The image is developed right from the start of the opening chorus, in which the men on the watchtower announce to the daughters of Zion the arrival of their bridegroom. This image explains why a cantata which deals primarily and most tenderly with the subject of love, starts with the strongly accented strains of a rather martial instrumental theme into which the wake-up call of the chorale will imbed itself in a spectacular display of musical imagery. The tenor recitative then develops fully the theme of the love meeting between bride and groom, the first being the enraptured soul, the latter Jesus himself. All of the text is culled from biblical sources and, of course, primarily, the great love poem of the Bible, the Song of Songs. The soprano/bass duet that follows is one of the two love duets which constitute the two sustaining pillars of the work. Here, Jesus and the soul exchange words of not only great tenderness but actually flaming ardor ("I wait with burning incense"), which they intertwine with the joyful babble of a high-pitched violin. At this point, in the center of the cantata, framed by the pillars of the two love duets, resounds the tenor chorale, a piece of celebratory intensity unsurpassed in musical literature. In the following bass recitative, the voice is still that of Jesus, inviting the soul to come to him in words that are awash in tender sensuality (listen to the last two lines, quoted again from the Song of Songs). In the second soprano/bass duet, an oboe wraps itself around the voices for an expression of love and desire that is as much dance as music. If the text and the mingling therein of mine and yours are not quite logical, it is probably because Bach wanted to be faithful to the exact quotation from the Song of Songs on which this movement is built. Here again, love could not be expressed in loftier but also earthier terms. Bach's mystical raptures are always very much of this world. And then, with appropriate grandeur in its simplicity, the last verse of the chorale resounds in a straight four-part vocal setting, with all instruments ablaze, giving the great chorale melody its last and supreme due.

– Simon Wainrib (1994)