

## BWV 117 "Sei Lob und Ehr dem höchsten Gut"

### 1. Chorus

Sei Lob und Ehr dem höchsten Gut,  
Dem Vater aller Güte,  
Dem Gott, der alle Wunder tut,  
Dem Gott, der mein Gemüte  
mit seinem reichen Trost erfüllt,  
Dem Gott, der allen Jammer stillt.  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!

### 2. Rezitativ B

Es danken dir die Himmelsheer,  
O Herrscher aller Thronen,  
Und die auf Erden, Luft und Meer  
In deinem Schatten wohnen,  
Die preisen deine Schöpfermacht,  
Die alles also wohl bedacht.  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!

### 3. Arie T

Was unser Gott geschaffen hat,  
Das will er auch erhalten;  
Darüber will er früh und spat  
Mit seiner Gnade walten.  
In seinem ganzen Königreich  
Ist alles recht und alles gleich.  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!

### 4. Chorale

Ich rief dem Herrn in meiner Not:  
Ach Gott, vernimm mein Schreien!  
Da half mein Helfer mir vom Tod  
Und ließ mir Trost gedeihen.  
Drum dank, ach Gott, drum dank ich  
dir;  
Ach danket, danket Gott mit mir!  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!

### 5. Rezitativ A

Der Herr ist noch und nimmer nicht  
Von seinem Volk geschieden,  
Er bleibt ihre Zuversicht,  
Ihr Segen, Heil und Frieden;  
Mit Mutterhänden leitet er  
Die Seinen stetig hin und her.  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!

### 6. Arie B

Wenn Trost und Hülf ermangeln muß,  
Die alle Welt erzeiget,  
So kommt, so hilft der Überfluß,  
Der Schöpfer selbst, und neiget  
Die Vateraugen denen zu,  
Die sonst nirgend finden Ruh.  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!

### 1. Chorus, Verse 1

Praise and honor be to the highest good,  
to the Father of all goodness,  
to God, who works all wonders,  
to God, who fills my spirit  
with His abundant comfort,  
to God, who calms all woe.  
Give honor to our God!

### 2. Recitative B

The heavenly host thanks you,  
O ruler of all thrones,  
and those in earth, air, and sea  
who live in Your shadow  
praise Your creative might  
which has well considered all things.  
Give honor to our God!

### 3. Aria T

What our God has created  
He will also sustain;  
Concerning all that, He will, early and late,  
Govern with His grace.  
In His entire kingdom  
all is right and all is equal.  
Give honor to our God!

### 4. Chorale

I call to the Lord in my distress:  
ah, God, heed my cries!  
For my Helper has saved me from death  
and let my comfort thrive.  
Therefore thanks, ah God, therefore I thank You;  
ah, thank, thank God with me!  
Give honor to our God!

### 5. Recitative A

The Lord is not yet and never shall be  
from His people parted.  
He remains their refuge,  
their blessing, salvation, and peace.  
With motherly hands He leads  
His own at all times here and there.  
Give honor to our God!

### 6. Aria B

When comfort and help are lacking,  
such as all the world might render,  
then He who is abundance comes and helps,  
the Creator Himself, and inclines  
His fatherly eyes to them  
who otherwise would nowhere find rest.  
Give honor to our God!

Ps 72.18 Blessed is the  
God of Israel who  
alone does wondrous  
things

Rev 5.13 I heard every  
creature in heaven and  
on earth and under the  
sea and all therein say,  
to him who sits upon  
the throne...be  
blessing and honor  
and glory and might.

Ps 18.6 In my distress  
I called upon the  
Lord... he heard my  
voice

Ps 94.14 The Lord will  
not forsake his people.  
Ps 46.1 God is our  
refuge (Zuversich)

**7. Aria A**

Ich will dich all mein Leben lang,  
O Gott, von nun an ehren;  
Man soll, o Gott, den Lobgesang  
An allen Orten hören.  
Mein ganzes Herz ermuntere sich,  
Mein Geist und Leib erfreue sich.  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!

**8. Rezitativ T**

Ihr, die ihr Christi Namen nennt,  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!  
Ihr, die ihr Gottes Macht bekennt,  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!  
Die falschen Götzen macht zu Spott,  
Der Herr ist Gott, der Herr ist Gott;  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!

**9. Chor**

So kommet vor sein Angesicht  
Mit jauchzenvollem Springen;  
Bezahlet die gelobte Pflicht  
Und laßt uns fröhlich singen:  
Gott hat es alles wohl bedacht  
Und alles, alles recht gemacht.  
Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre!

**7. Aria A**

I will, my whole life long,  
o God, from now on, honor you.  
o God, the praise song shall  
be heard in all places.  
My whole heart is aroused,  
my spirit and body rejoice.  
Give honor to our God!

**8. Recitative T**

You, who profess Christ's name,  
give honor to our God!  
You, who acknowledge God's power,  
give honor to our God!  
Put the false idols to ridicule.  
The Lord is God, the Lord is God.  
Give honor to our God!

**9. Chorus**

Then come before His presence  
with jubilant leaping;  
Repay your promised duty  
and let us joyfully sing:  
God has all things well planned  
and all things, all things rightly done.  
Give honor to our God!  
[Composite translation]

Ps 104.33 I will sing to  
the Lord as long as I  
live

**Conductor's Notes** © Ellen Frye

BWV 117 *Sei Lob und Ehr dem höchsten Gut*, undated and for an unspecified occasion, was likely composed between 1728 and 1731 as a cantata for a wedding or some other celebration. John Elliot Gardiner, in his 2000 Bach Pilgrimage Tour, grouped it with cantatas for Cantate, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter.

The chorale tune, *Es ist das Heil uns kommer her* was first published in the "Achtliederbuch" (1524). The chorale text, by John Jacob Schutz (1675), is basically a hymn of praise, each verse ending with the refrain, "Give honor to our God." This text, unchanged throughout the cantata, is somewhat static, but Bach's music, as usual, is full of dynamic tension and forward motion. A number of specific musical devices create a unity in the music that is quite a contrast to the pedestrian uniformity of the text.

**Cantus firmus**

The first line of the chorale melody is tonally ambiguous, beginning with repeated notes on the fifth degree of the scale, moving to the lowered seventh and falling to the fourth.



The chorale appears fully in the first, fourth and final movements,\* and the opening line in four other movements.

\* In the NBA score, the final verse is set to the music of the opening chorus instead of the plain chorale; both Hermuth Rilling and John Elliot Gardiner perform the cantata this way. In the Drinker edition and in recordings by Nicholas Harnoncourt and Pieter Jan Leusink, the final verse is set to the plain chorale of Verse 4.

*Verse 3.* In the tenor aria, the line “In His entire kingdom” is set to the repeated notes followed by a long and joyous *melisma* before the closing of the phrase.

Mm 38–39



*Verses 5 and 6.* In the alto recitative and the bass aria, the refrain phrase is set to the repeated notes with a following motif derived from the second half of the line:

Verse 5, mm 9 ff

Verse 6, mm 38ff



In both these movements, the cantus firmus is repeated at different positions of the scale, for a total of fourteen times, 6 in the recitative and 8 in the aria.

*Verse 7.* In the alto aria, the repeated notes are less noticeable, yet surely Bach intended this echo, especially in the refrain line:



## Dance Rhythms

The music of much of this cantata is so dance-like, one might even hear the cantata as a kind of dance suite.

*Verse 1* (chorus) is in a swinging 6/8 meter.

*Verse 2* (bass recitative) has a lively 3/8 arioso with a steady eighth–sixteenth pattern:



*Verse 3* (tenor aria) is in a stately 6/8 of a *siciliano*.

*Verse 5* (alto recitative) and *Verse 6* (bass aria) repeat throughout the same rhythmic pattern of Verse 2 but in 4/4 meter.

*Verse 7* (alto aria) is written in 3/4 but, with triplets throughout, the implied meter is 9/8.

## Hemiolas

A more specific aspect of Bach’s rhythmic unity is his use of the *hemiola*. The Baroque *hemiola* is basically a rhythmic shift in which two triple measures are merged into one long one with beats of double length. Bach uses this delightful shift a number of times.

*Verse 1.* In the first movement, the cadence of the ritornello overlaps the beginning of the first vocal *stollen*; the *hemiola* falls between beats 1-2-3 of measure 23 and 4-5-6 of measure 24:

Mm 23–24, bass and continuo



Similar *hemiolas* appear in measures 55-56, the cadence into the abgesang, and the final cadence.

*Verse 2.* At bars 26 and 27, the bass voice sings the *hemiola* while the continuo plays the steady rhythmic pattern in the 3/8-meter; the continuo repeats the *hemiola* in the final cadence.

hemiola

un - sern Gott die Eh - re!

*Verse 3.* Bach ends each section by having the oboes drop out for the cadence, leaving the tenor voice to effect the *hemiola* over the steady 6/8 in the continuo. The first *hemiola* cadence is at mm 15–16, the second at mm 32–33, the third at 44–45, and the fourth at 57–58. The most elaborate one is at the end of the second A section, falling on the word *gnaden* (grace).

Mm 32–33

hemiola

ten, mit sei - ner Gna - de wal - ten.

## Form

While Bach unifies the movements of the cantata through these musical devices, he simultaneously creates a variety of musical structures to contain the metrically unchanging chorale text.

### *Verses 1 and 9* (chorus)

Ritornello	A (Stollen)	Interlude	A (Stollen)	Interlude	B (Abgesang)	Ritornello
	Lines 1-2		Lines 3-4		Lines 5-7	

### *Verse 3* (tenor aria)

Ritornello	A	Interlude	A'	Interlude	B	Interlude	A''	Ritornello
	Lines 1-2		Lines 3-4		Lines 5-6		Line 7	

### *Verse 6* (bass aria)

Ritornello	A	Interlude	B	Interlude	C	Ritornello
	Lines 1-3		Lines 4-6		Line 7	

### *Verse 7* (alto aria)

Ritornello	A	A	Ritornello	B	Interlude	A	Ritornello
	Lines 1-2	Lines 3-4		Lines 5-7		Lines 5-7	