

BWV 4 Christ lag in Todesbanden, cantata for Easter Sunday

1. Sinfonia. Vi I/II, Va I/II, BC

2. Versus 1. SATB V I/II, Va I/II, Crn, Trb I-3, BC

Christ lag in Todesbanden
Für unsre Sünd gegeben,
Er ist wieder erstanden
Und hat uns bracht das Leben;
Des wir sollen fröhlich sein,
Gott loben und ihm dankbar sein
Und singen halleluja,
Halleluja!

3. Versus 2. SA, Crn, Trb, BC

Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt
Bei allen Menschenkindern,
Das macht' alles unsre Sünd,
Kein Unschuld war zu finden.
Davon kam der Tod so bald
Und nahm über uns Gewalt,
Hielt uns in seinem Reich gefangen.
Halleluja!

4. Versus 3. T, V I/II, BC

Jesus Christus, Gottes Sohn,
An unser Statt ist kommen
Und hat die Sünde weggetan,
Damit dem Tod genommen
All sein Recht und sein Gewalt,
Da bleibet nichts denn Tods Gestalt,
Den Stach'l hat er verloren.
Halleluja!

5. Versus 4. SATB, BC

Es war ein wunderlicher Krieg,
Da Tod und Leben rungen,
Das Leben behielt den Sieg,,
Es hat den Tod verschlungen.
Die Schrift hat verkündigt das,
Wie ein Tod den andern fraß,
Ein Spott aus dem Tod ist worden.
Halleluja!

6. Versus 5. B, violino I/II, Viola I/II, Continuo

Hier ist das rechte Osterlamm,
Davon Gott hat geboten,
Das ist hoch an des Kreuzes Stamm
In heißer Lieb gebraten,,
Das Blut zeichnet unsre Tür,,
Das hält der Glaub dem Tode für,
Der Würger kann uns nicht mehr schaden.
Halleluja!

Christ lay in death's bonds
sacrificed for our sins,
he is risen again
and has brought us life
For this we should be joyful,
praise God and be thankful to him
and sing alleluia,
Alleluia!

Nobody could overcome death
among all humanity's children.
this was entirely caused by our sin,
no innocence was to be found.
Therefore death came so quickly
and seized power over us,
held us captive in his kingdom.
Alleluia!

Jesus Christ, God's son,
has come in our stead
and has put aside sin,
thereby depriving death of
all his privileges and his power,
thus nothing of death's form remains.
Its sting is lost.
Alleluia!

It was a wondrous battle,
when death and life wrestled.
Life won the victory,
it has swallowed up death
The Scriptures foretold
how one death would devour the other.
A mockery is what Death has become.
Alleluia!

Here is the true Easter lamb
that God has offered
which high on the beam of the cross
in burning love is roasted,
whose blood marks our doors,
which faith holds out in front of death,
the destroyer can harm us no more
Alleluia!

Todes bande:

Ps 18:4: ...the **CORDS OF DEATH** encompassed me.
2 Sam 22:26 The sorrows of hell compassed me about; the **SNARES OF DEATH** prevented me

Christ indeed has risen from death. —*Victimae paschali laudes*

Rom 5:12 ...sin came into the world through one man and death through sin and so death spread to all men.

Heb 9:26 He has appeared once for all...to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

1 Cor. 15:55 O death, where is thy sting?

Death and Life have contended in the wondrous battle. The Prince of life, who died, reigns immortal. —*Victimae paschali laudes*

1 Cor. 15:54 Death is swallowed up in victory

1 Cor. 5:7 Christ our Paschal lamb has been sacrificed.

Ex. 12:1–13. Account of the first Passover.

A lamb has redeemed the sheep. —*Victimae paschali laudes*

7. Versus 6. ST, BC

So feiern wir das hohe Fest
 Mit Herzensfreud und Wonne,
 Das uns der Herre scheinen läßt,
 Er ist selber die Sonne,
 Der durch seiner Gnade Glanz
 Erleuchtet unsre Herzen ganz,
 Der Sünden Nacht ist verschwunden.
 Halleluja!

So we celebrate the high feast
 with joy in our hearts and delight
 that the Lord makes shine for us,
 He is himself the sun
 who through the brilliance of his grace
 enlightens our hearts completely,
 the night of sin has vanished.
 Alleluia!

1 Cor. 5:8 Let us therefore
 celebrate the festival...

Christians, offer praises to
 the paschal victim. —
Victimae paschali laudes

8. Versus 7. SATB, V I/II, Crn, Trb I-3, BC

Wir essen und leben wohl
 In rechten Osterfladen,
 Der alte Sauerteig nicht soll
 Sein bei dem Wort Gnaden,
 Christus will die Koste sein
 Und speisen die Seel allein,
 Der Glaub will keins andern leben.
 Halleluja!

We eat and live well
 on the true Easter bread.
 The old sour-leaven shall not
 be with the word of grace,
 Christ will be our food
 and He alone will feed the soul.
 Faith would live no other way.
 Alleluia

1 Cor. 5:7 Cleanse out the
 old leaven...let us keep the
 feast not with the leaven of
 malice and wickedness but
 with the unleavened bread
 of sincerity and truth.

Composite Translation

Notes on the cantata © 2012 Ellen Frye

BWV 4 *Christ lag in Todesbanden* is an Easter cantata composed as early as 1707, perhaps as an audition piece for the organist position at St. Blasius in Mulhausen. The cantata text does not deviate from the original Martin Luther chorale text, published in 1524, and the composition is a set of chorale variations with the chorale melody retained throughout. After the opening *sinfonia*, the cantata is symmetrical, the turning point the central verse that paints the battle between life and death.

Sinfonia	Versus 1	Versus 2	Versus 3	Versus 4	Versus 5	Versus 6	Versus 7
	Christ died and rose again	Death held us captive	Christ came to defeat death	Life wrestles death to defeat	Love redeems us	We celebrate light	We live on the true Easter bread
	SATB chorus	SA duet	T solo	SATB motet	B solo	ST duet	SATB chorale

Although the compositional style is within the 17th century tradition, the young Bach showed extraordinary daring in altering the original chorale melody, a melody that had been set by numerous composers of the 16th and 17th centuries in its original Dorian mode. Indeed, Luther's melody itself had been derived from an 11th century Easter sequence, also in Dorian.

Victimae paschali laudes (11th century)



Christ lag in Todesbanden (1524)



Bach altered this very well known chorale in two ways. First he transposed the melody from Dorian to E minor—this in a time of mean-tone tuning when E minor would have sounded quite different from D minor. He may have made this change in order to better express, via the system of tonal allegory that was integral to 17th century music composition, suffering and sorrow and particularly the Passion. Even more striking than the key change is the chromatic alteration he made on the second note of the opening line, creating a falling semitone sorrow motif that haunts the whole cantata.



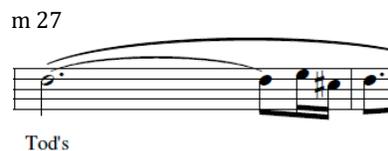
This early version of BWV 4 is scored for strings and voices. Bach performed the cantata at least twice in Leipzig, and for the second of those performances he added winds (cornetto and 3 trombones) to double the voices.

Sinfonia. The 14-bar sinfonia encapsulates the theme of the cantata: the movement from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. The opening bars sound the sorrow motif—in the long-note values in the continuo and in quarter notes in first violins—echoing, then repeating before lining out the beginning of the chorale. At measure 10 the strings begin playing chains of ascending eighth notes, the same motif that Bach will use for the alleluias of the Verses 1 and 3.

Verse 1, a chorale fantasy with the *cantus firmus* in the soprano, also expresses the movement from the death to life. The two *stollen* present a dense counterpoint with many chromatics. At the *abgesang*, singers and instruments generate brisker rhythms to move into the joy of Easter. The movement closes with an *alla breve* in which the singers, doubled by the instruments, engage in an exuberant canon, finally ending with joyous *hockets* tossed among the voices before the final cadence.

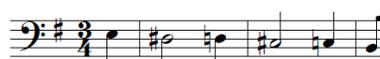
Verse 2, for sopranos, altos and continuo, is an abrupt mood shift into mourning. Luther's text reminds the faithful of the long centuries when death held humanity in its grip. The falling semitone and sustained dissonances convey humanity's hopelessness in the face of God's judgment against sin.

Verse 3 heralds the coming of Christ. The violins peel out a wild jubilation and the tenors announce that Christ has abolished sin and overcome death. In the *abgesang*, double stops for the violins emphasize the end of Death's "kingdom and power"; a dramatic pause after "there remains nothing..." leads to a brief adagio for "...of Death's shape," in which the tenors make the sign of the musical cross to depict the victory over sin.



Verse 4, the fugal motet at the center of the cantata, vividly portrays the battle between life and death. Sopranos, tenors, and basses engaged in the struggle while the altos sing the steady *cantus firmus* transposed to B minor (making the first note an f#, the note of the cross, as David pointed out). The *stretto* (beginning measure 29.3) separates the voices by one beat as the singers depict little deaths swallowing each other, and in the final phrase, "death has become a mockery," vocal *hockets* suggest scorn for the defeated death. π

Verse 5. Turning from the battle scene, Bach creates an image of priests solemnly intoning an Easter mass. The continuo opens with a descending chromatic line, the traditional Baroque *lamento* used by composers since Monteverdi to express grief.



The bass begins the first line of each stollen transposed down a fourth, returning to E minor for each second line. The text draws the parallel between the first Passover and Easter. At the end of the second *stollen*, Bach makes the musical sign of the cross again, once with basses and violins for the word “cross,” and shortly after, violins only, for the word “love,” thus linking Christ’s crucifixion and God’s love for humanity.

mm 28-29

m 32

(liebe)

— Kreu - - - - zes,

Verse 6 is a dance that celebrates the disappearance of death and the ritual observance of Easter. Soprano and tenor sing the chorale tune in imitation, sometimes plain, sometimes in cascading triplets. The continuo dances a dotted rhythm in almost perpetual motion, pausing only to allow “our hearts,” which have just been illuminated, to shine through.

Verse 7. The closing verse is a plain but rich four-part harmonization of the chorale. Particularly striking is the penultimate V–VI cadence on C major.

Further Notes

The Norton Critical Score for BWV 4, edited by Gerhard Hertz (1967) includes background information, verse-by-verse analyses, and reprints of critical notes by Bach scholars Spitta, Pirro, Whittaker, Schering, and Smend. More recent commentary is in the liner notes from John Elliot Gardiner’s Bach Pilgrimage Series, Volume 22, which can be downloaded for free at <monteverdi.co.uk/shop/albums/cantatas/22>.

Victimae paschali laudes

Latin	English	Chorale verse
Victimae paschali laudes immolent Christiani.	Christians, offer praises to the Paschal victim!	<i>Verse 6</i>
Agnus redemit oves: Christus innocens Patri re conciliavit peccatores.	A lamb has redeemed the sheep. The sinless Christ has reconciled sinners to the Father.	<i>Verse 5</i>
Mors et vita duello confluxere mirando: dux vitae mortuus, regnat vivus.	Death and life contended in that wondrous battle: the Prince of life, who died, reigns immortal.	<i>Verse 4</i>
Dic nobis Maria, quid vidisti in via?	“Tell us, Mary, what did you see on the way?”	
Sepulcrum Christi viventis, et gloriam vidi resurgentis:	“The tomb of the living Christ and the glory of him arisen;	
Angelicos testes, udarium, et vestes.	“Angels attesting, the shroud, the cloth.”	
Surrexit Christus spes mea: praecedet suos in Galilaeam.	“Christ my hope has risen. He goes before you into Galilee.”	
Credendum est magis soli Mariae veraci Quam Judaeorum Turbae fallaci.	We believe the witness Mary’s word over the lies of the Jews.	
Scimus Christum surrexisse a mortuis vere: tu nobis, victor Rex, miserere.	Christ indeed has risen from death. Have mercy on us, victor King.	<i>Verse 1</i>
Amen.	Amen.	