

BWV 41 - "Jesu, nun sei gepreiset" Cantata for the New Year

1. Chorus

Jesu, nun sei gepreiset
 Zu diesem neuen Jahr
 Für dein Güt, uns beweiset
 In aller Not und G'fahr,
 Daß wir haben erlebt
 Die neu fröhliche Zeit,
 Die voller Gnaden schwebet
 Und ewger Seligkeit;
 Daß wir in guter Stille
 Das alt Jahr habn erfüllet.
 Wir wolln uns dir ergeben
 Itzund und immerdar,
 Behüte Leib, Seel und Leben
 Hinfort durchs ganze Jahr!

2 . Arie S

Laß uns, o höchster Gott, das Jahr vollbringen,
 Damit das **Ende** so wie dessen **Anfang** sei.
 Es stehe deine Hand uns bei,
 Daß künftig bei des Jahres Schluß
 Wir bei des Segens Überfluß
 Wie itzt ein Halleluja singen.

3. Rezitativ A

Ach! deine Hand, dein Segen muß allein
Das A und O, der Anfang und das Ende sein.
 Das Leben trägest du in deiner Hand,
 Und unsre Tage sind bei dir geschrieben;
 Dein Auge steht auf Stadt und Land;
 Du zähltest unser Wohl und kennest unser Leiden,
 Ach! gib von beiden,
 Was deine Weisheit will,
 worzu dich dein Erbarmen angetrieben.

4. Arie T

Woferne du den edlen Frieden
 Vor unsern Leib und Stand beschieden,
 So laß der Seele doch dein selig machend Wort.
 Wenn uns dies Heil begegnet,
 So sind wir hier gesegnet
 Und Auserwählte dort!

5. Rezitativ B und Chor

Doch weil der Feind bei Tag und Nacht
 Zu unserm Schaden wacht
 Und unsre Ruhe will verstören,
 So wollest du, o Herre Gott, erhören,
 Wenn wir in heiliger Gemeinde beten:
 - *Den Satan unter unsre Füße treten.* -
 So bleiben wir zu deinem Ruhm
 Dein auserwähltes Eigentum
 Und können auch nach Kreuz und Leiden
 Zur Herrlichkeit von hinnen scheiden.

1. Chorus (chorale v1)

Jesus, now be praised
 at this new year
 for Your goodness, revealed to us
 in all need and danger,
 that we have lived to see
 this new joyful time,
 that hovers full of grace
 and eternal blessedness;
 so that we, in good peacefulness,
 have completed the old year.
 We want to give ourselves to You
 now and evermore,
 protect body, soul and life
 hence forth throughout the whole year!

2. Aria S

Let us, o highest God, complete the year,
 so that its **end be like its beginning**.
 May Your hand be with us,
 so that later, at the close of the year,
 we may, with blessings abundant
 as now, sing a Hallelujah.

3. Recitative A

Ah! Your hand, Your blessing must alone be
the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.
 You carry our lives in Your hand,
 and our days are circumscribed by You;
 Your eye rests upon city and country;
 You reckon our well-being and know our sorrows.
 Ah! grant of both
 what Your wisdom wills,
 however Your mercy prompts You.

4. Aria T

Insofar as You have directed a noble peace
 for our bodies and our place (in this world),
 so grant to our souls Your saving Word.
 When we encounter this healing,
 we become blessed here (on earth),
 and the elect there (in heaven)!

5. Recitative B and SAT Chorus

Yet since the enemy day and night
 watches for our harm
 and wishes to disturb our rest,
 so may You, o Lord God, attend,
 when we pray with devout intention:
May Satan be crushed under our feet.
 Thus we shall remain, to your glory,
 Your chosen sanctuary
 and can also, after suffering and sorrow
 depart from here to blessedness

6. Choral

Dein ist allein die Ehre,
 Dein ist allein der Ruhm;
 Geduld im Kreuz uns lehre,
 Regier all unser Tun,
 Bis wir fröhlich abscheiden
 Ins ewig Himmelreich,
 Zu wahren Fried und Freude,
 Den Heiligen Gottes gleich.
 Indes machs mit uns allen
 Nach deinem Wohlgefallen:
 Solchs singet heut ohn Scherzen
 Die christgläubige Schar
 Und wünscht mit Mund und Herzen
 Ein seligs neues Jahr.

6. Chorale (v 3)

Yours alone is the honor,
 Yours alone is the glory;
 teach us patience in [bearing the] cross,
 govern all our actions,
 until we joyfully depart
 into the eternal heavenly kingdom,
 to true peace and joy,
 like the saints of God.
 Meanwhile, do with us all
 according to Your pleasure:
 So sings today without jesting
 the faithful Christian flock
 and wishes with voice and heart
 for a blessed new year.
(Composite translation)

Conductor's Notes © Ellen Frye

BWV 41 *Jesu, nun sei gepreiset* is a chorale cantata was composed for New Year's Day, January 1, 1725. The chorale tune is "Ein schön geistlich Gesangbuch" (Melchior Vulpius, 1609). The anonymous librettist assigned the first and last verses of a New Year's Day text by Johannes Herman (1593) to the opening and closing movements and paraphrased the middle verse for the inner movements. Neither of the readings for the day (Galatians 3: 23-29 and Luke 2: 21) is referenced in the libretto, but a quote from the Book of Revelation is emphasized:

Rev 21:6 I am the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end (KJV) Ich bin das A und das O, der Anfang und das Ende (Luther Bibel 1545).

The first appearance of the metaphor, in the first aria, "Let us...complete the year so that its ending be like its beginning," expresses the cyclical nature of time. In the following recitative, "your blessings are...the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end... You carry our lives in your hand and our days are circumscribed by you," the metaphor expresses God's abundant blessings and also his governance of human life. So the phrase "alpha and omega" refers both to time as a perfect circle and to the physical-spiritual scope of God's dominion over mankind. Bach seizes on the metaphor as a unifying force for the entire cantata, using a number of composing devices:

- **Form:** The rondo form is a clear expression of the end returning to the beginning. In BWV 41, Bach transforms the typical chorale form, *Stollen–Stollen–Abgesang*, into a rondo by repeating the last two lines of the text to the first two lines of the music: AABA. In the opening movement, the rondo form is extended by ritornellos that precede each set of vocal lines. Both arias are ABA rondos with ritornellos.
- **Harmony:** The circle-of-fifths harmonic progression expresses movement away from and toward the tonic key—circular motion—while at the same time expressing the scope of movement into related keys. Bach uses the progressions throughout the chorus and the second aria; in the second recitative, the descending fifths move from the sharpest area (A major) through the tonic C major to the flattest area (E \flat major).
- **Ambitus.** The range of a single instrument or an entire orchestra can also express scope as a metaphor for God's dominion. In the opening chorus, at the ends of the ritornellos, ascending and descending C major scales are heard simultaneously in the first trumpet and the continuo. In the second aria, Bach composes wide leaps and long scales that move back and forth through the full range of the violoncello piccolo (C–b').

Individual movements

Chorus and chorale. Both chorus and chorale end the *abgesang* on D major, which may be heard as a metaphor for the change from era of the Old Testament to the Christian era; *i.e.*, the lifting of humanity through salvation. Both make the return to C major by repeating lines 13 and 14 to the tune of lines 1 and 2, and both change to triple meter during the *abgesang*. However, in the chorale, the $\frac{3}{4}$ time (lines 11–14) is clearly a dance rhythm that points to the new year/new era as a time for dancing. In the chorus, the $\frac{3}{4}$ section (lines 9–10) is marked *adagio* to express the text, “that we, in good peacefulness/have completed the old year.” This 2-line phrase acts as a prelude to the following fugato setting for lines 11–14.

The **G major soprano aria** is a pastoral, a reminder that Jesus is the good shepherd. God’s hand provides the abundant blessings that lead the Faithful to “sing hallelujah.”

The **alto recitative** moves from A minor to E minor, but in the third and fourth measures, Bach emphasizes C major, the tonic of the cantata, for the words “alpha and omega, beginning and end.”

In the **A minor tenor aria**, God’s gift of peace for physical life (“body and station in life”) is balanced with God’s gift of blessing for spiritual life (soul). In B section, the earthly blessings include the promise that the Faithful will be transformed into the “elect” in heaven.

The **final recitative**, set for bass and continuo with a brief SAT chorus, prepares the return to C major. The text announces that “the enemy” is ever-present; at midpoint, Bach inserts a piece of the Lutheran liturgy (“may Satan be crushed under our feet”) and represents the battle through the soprano-alto-tenor chorus chanting the litany over the bass, which holds a long note and then evokes Satan’s fall through a twisting descent to the cadence. The deep flats for the crushing of Satan and the extreme dissonances on the words “cross and suffering” remind the Faithful that their salvation was achieved only through the crucifixion.

Further Notes

Violoncello piccolo. The violoncello piccolo and the viola pomposa are different instruments in appearance, with the former played like a cello and the latter on the arm. Both, however, have cello tuning with an added fifth string tuned to e’. The invention of the viola pomposa has been ascribed to Bach, supposedly around 1724, which coincides with the time when Bach began scoring obbligato parts for the instrument. Although Bach labeled all these parts “violoncello piccolo,” Laurence Dreyfus (*Bach’s Continuo Groups*, 1987) believes that the solos were almost certainly performed on a viola pomposa. The eight cantatas that include a violoncello piccolo solo are all from Bach’s second annual cycle of cantatas.

October 22, 1724: BWV 180 *Schmuct dich, o liebe Seele* (20th Sunday after Trinity)

November 5, 1724: BWV 115 *Mache dich, mein Geist, bereit* (22nd Sunday after Trinity)

January 1, 1725: BWV 41 *Jesu, nun sei gepreiset* (New Year’s Day)

April 2, 1725: BWV 6 *Bleibe bei uns, denn es will Abend werden* (Easter Monday)

April 25, 1725: BWV 85 *Ich bin ein guter Hirt* (2nd Sunday after Easter)

May 13, 1725: BWV 185 *Barmherziges Herze der ewigen Liebe* (4th Sunday after Easter)

May 21, 1725: BWV 68 *Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt* (Monday after Pentecost)

May 22, 1725: BWV 175 *Er Rufet seinen Schafen mit Namen* (Tuesday after Pentecost)

November 3, 1726: BWV 49 *Ich geh und suche mit Verlangen* (20th Sunday after Trinity)

Alpha and Omega. Eric Chafe has written an extended analysis of this cantata in “*Anfang und Ende: Cyclic Recurrence in Bach’s Cantata Jesu, nun sei gepreiset, BWV 41*” in *Bach Perspectives* 1 (1995).