

BWV 95 - Christus, der ist mein Leben (Cantata for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity)*1. Chor SATB und Rezitativ T*

Christus, der ist mein Leben,
 Sterben ist mein Gewinn;
 Dem tu ich mich ergeben,
 Mit Freud fahr ich dahin.
 Mit Freuden,
 Ja mit Herzenslust
 Will ich von hinnen scheiden.
 Und hieß es heute noch: Du mußt!
 So bin ich willig und bereit,
 Den armen Leib, die abgekehrten Glieder,
 Das Kleid der Sterblichkeit
 Der Erde wieder
 In ihren Schoß zu bringen.
 Mein Sterbelied ist schon gemacht;
 Ach, dürfte ichs heute singen!
 Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin,
 Nach Gottes Willen,
 Getrost ist mir mein Herz und Sinn,
 Sanft und stille.
 Wie Gott mir verheißen hat:
 Der Tod ist mein Schlaf geworden.

2. Rezitativ S

Nun, falsche Welt!
 Nun habe ich weiter nichts mit dir zu tun;
 Mein Haus ist schon bestellt,
 Ich kann weit sanfter ruhn,
 Als da ich sonst bei dir,
 An deines Babels Flüssen,
 Das Wollustsalz verschlucken müssen,
 Wenn ich an deinem Lustrevier
 Nur Sodomsäpfel konnte brechen.
 Nein, nein! nun kann ich mit gelassnerm
 Mute sprechen:

3. Choral S

Valet will ich dir geben,
 Du arge, falsche Welt,
 Dein stündlich böses Leben
 Durchaus mir nicht gefällt.
 Im Himmel ist gut wohnen,
 Hinauf steht mein Begier.
 Da wird Gott ewig lohnen
 Dem, der ihm dient allhier.

1. Chorus SATB and Recitative T

Christ is all my being,
 death is my reward;
 to this I abandon myself,
 With joy I depart hither.
 With joy,
 indeed with heart-felt delight
 will I depart from here.
 Even if called today: you must!
 Still, I am willing and ready—
 my poor body, my wasted limbs,
 garment of mortality—
 back into the earth,
 to bring them into its bosom.
 My funeral song is already composed;
 ah, that I might sing it today!
 With peace and joy I depart thither
 according to God's will,
 My heart and mind are comforted,
 calm, and quiet.
 As God had promised me:
 death has become my sleep.

2. Recitative S

Now, false world!
 Now have I nothing more to do with you;
 my house is already prepared,
 I can rest much more peacefully
 than ever I once did with you,
 by your waters of Babylon,
 where I had to swallow the salt of lust;
 when in your pleasure quarters
 I could pluck only the apples of Sodom.
 No, no! now, with composed courage,
 I can say:

3. Chorale S

Farewell would I say to you,
 you wicked, false world,
 your sinful, evil life
 thoroughly displeases me.
 In heaven there is a good life,
 Upwards I direct my longing.
 There will God eternally reward
 The one who serves him here.

*Christus, der
 ist mein
 Leben
 (1609), v 1*

*Mit Fried und
 Freud ich
 fahr dahin
 (1524),
 v 1*

*Valet will ich
 dir geben
 (1613), v 1*

4. Rezitativ T

Ach könnte mir doch bald so wohl geschehn,
 Daß ich den Tod,
 Das Ende aller Not,
 In meinen Gliedern könnte sehn;
 Ich wollte ihn zu meinem Leibgedinge wählen
 Und alle Stunden nach ihm zählen.

5. Arie T

Ach, schlage doch bald, selge Stunde,
 Den allerletzten Glockenschlag!
 Komm, komm, ich reiche dir die Hände,
 Komm, mache meiner Not ein Ende,
 Du längst erseufzter Sterbenstag!

6. Rezitativ B

Denn ich weiß dies
 Und glaub es ganz gewiß,
 Daß ich aus meinem Grabe
 Ganz einen sichern Zugang zu dem Vater
 habe.
 Mein Tod ist nur ein Schlaf.
 Dadurch der Leib, der hier von Sorgen
 abgenommen,
 Zur Ruhe kommen.
 Sucht nun ein Hirte sein verlornes Schaf,
 Wie sollte Jesus mich nicht wieder finden,
 Da er mein Haupt und ich sein Gliedmaß bin!
 So kann ich nun mit frohen Sinnen
 Mein selig Auferstehn auf meinen Heiland
 gründen.

7. Choral

Weil du vom Tod erstanden bist,
 Werd ich im Grab nicht bleiben;
 Dein letztes Wort mein Auffahrt ist,
 Todsfurcht kannst du vertreiben.
 Denn wo du bist, da komm ich hin,
 Daß ich stets bei dir leb und bin;
 Drum fahr ich hin mit Freuden.

4. Recitative T

Ah, that I might indeed be so blessed
 that I could see death,
 the end of all suffering,
 in my limbs;
 I would choose it for my dowry
 and number all the hours by it.

5. Aria T

Ah, strike soon, blessed hour,
 the very last bell-stroke!
 Come, come, I reach out my hand to you,
 come, make an end of my suffering,
 you long sighed-for day of my death!

6. Recitative B

For I know this
 and believe it most certainly,
 that I, from out of my grave,
 have a sure path to the Father.

My death is but a sleep,
 through which my body, wasted by worry
 here,
 shall come to rest.
 If then a shepherd seeks his lost sheep,
 how should Jesus not find me again,
 since he is my head and I am a limb of his!
 So now I can, with joyful mind,
 ground my blessed resurrection in my
 Savior.

7. Chorale

Since you are risen from death,
 I will not remain in the grave;
 Your final word is my ascension,
 You can drive away the fear of death.
 For wherever you are, there shall I come,
 so that I may always live and be with You;
 therefore I depart with joy.

*Wenn mein
 Stündlein
 vorhanden
 ist (1560), v
 4*

Notes on the cantata © Ellen Frye

BWV 95 *Christus, der ist mein Lieben*, written for the sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, was first performed on September 12, 1723. The gospel for the day is Luke 7:11–17, the story of the dead son of a widow who came back to life when Jesus touched the bier. Lutheran doctrine equates this resurrection with the resurrection that awaits the Faithful when they die, and so BWV 95 focuses on death as an event that all must look forward to with joy. Bach structured the cantata around four chorales, each a funeral hymn affirming the reward that comes with death. These expressions of church doctrine are meant to surround and support the Faithful as they ponder their own readiness for death.

In the opening chorus, two chorales are separated by a tenor arioso and recitative. The title chorale, *Christ is my life/death is my reward*, is embedded in a dance in which the syncopations of the strings and oboes surround the four square harmony of the singers. Bach interrupts the dance at the word “death” with sustained dissonances that pause and then resolve, letting the dance continue. An extended tenor arioso and recitative leads to the second chorale, *With joy I depart*, Martin Luther’s adaptation of the Latin *Nunc dimitis*. While the texts of the two chorales are connected through the line “with joy I depart”—the last line of the first chorale and the first line of the second—the music could not be more different. A modal canon between horn and oboes leads in each chorale line, the canon voices two-beats apart and at tonal intervals that create surprising dissonances. The vocal parts are pure homophony, as they were for the first chorale, and again Bach stops the chorale for death (“calm and quiet”). The overall effect, however, evokes a much earlier time than the gallant world of the opening chorale, a *stile antico* for the voices with instrumental echoes of Buxtehude or Pachelbel.

The third chorale, *Farewell I say to you, false world*, is introduced by a soprano recitative, a personal excoriation of the wicked world with its “salt of lust” and “apples of Sodom.” Without a pause, the voice segues into the sweetness of the chorale, each line sung without embellishment. Over and under the vocal line, the continuo and a pair of oboes d’amour vie with the voice in quirky figures that threaten to throw off the steady tempo—as if the enticing distractions of the world were trying to pull the Faithful off course.

The cantata closes with straightforward harmony of the final chorale, the fourth verse of *When my hour has come*, the violins adding a soaring descant, leading the soul to heaven. The final words of the text echo the key phrase of the opening movement: “Therefore I depart with joy.”

The emotional center of the cantata is the aria for tenor, two oboes d’amour, strings, and continuo. It is a personal portrayal of one of the Faithful waiting for death. Bach scores the strings as pizzicato funeral bells while the oboes play doleful phrases in parallel fourths. The vocal line is rhythmically challenging; the keyword “strike” (i.e., let the death bell strike) falls sometimes on the second beat, sometimes the first. The aria portrays both the personal longing for death (and resurrection) and the uneasiness—even fear—that inevitably must accompany the final moments.

Tonality

Eric Chafe, in his *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J.S. Bach*, sees tonal ascent and descent as metaphors for concepts of ascent and descent in 18th century Lutheran theology. In this cantata, he suggests that Bach incorporates ascent and descent—sharp/flat keys and melodic risings and fallings—into his harmonic scheme as a means of interpreting the duality of life and death.

Bach sets both the first movement (two chorales separated by tenor recitative) and the second (soprano recitative and chorale) in major and minor modes with the same keynote. In the opening movement, the keynote is G, with the first chorale in G major, the second in G minor (Dorian mode). The connecting tenor arioso and recitative modulates through flat regions (B, major and C minor) before the cadence on the D major dominant. Bach’s major/minor harmonies emphasize both aspects of death: the promise of resurrection and the difficult life through which the Faithful must move to achieve the reward.

In the second movement*, the harmonic movement is reversed, flowing from the D minor recitative directly into the D major chorale. Here the harmonic ascent represents a firm turning toward the death as the gateway to heaven.

In the tenor *da capo* aria, the key of D keeps the tonality high, the Faithful holding their thoughts on the promise of heaven. In the B section, Bach moves the harmony sharper and sharper—A, E, B, F#, C#, G#—before bringing the section to a close on F# major. I think that Bach uses tonally to bring the Faithful closer and closer to heaven so that when they return to the striking bells of the repeated A section, they will have already seen life after death. Here is a clear instance of the Baroque concept that A section of a *da capo* aria can never be the same once the B section has been heard.

The final two movements (bass recitative and closing chorale) bring the cantata back to G major to express the assurance of the Faithful, supported by the Church, that “death is but a sleep” leading to resurrection. Here Bach dramatizes the dual nature of death melodically. In the opening of the recitative, the basses rise to heaven; at the close, the bass voice descends a twelfth (from middle C down to low G) while the continuo rises. In the opening bars of the chorale, he sends the violins soaring to a very high E and then balances the ascent in the closing bars with the bass and tenor descending while the sopranos and violins calmly move around the keynote G.

Harmonic structure

Chorale—Recitative—Chorale	Recitative—Chorale	Recitative—Aria	Recitative—Chorale
G — B ₁ -c-D — g	d — D	D	G

Gospel for the day: Luke 7:11-17 (KJV)

11 And it came to pass the day after, that he went into a city called Nain; and many of his disciples went with him, and much people.

12 Now when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her.

13 And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not.

14 And he came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise.

15 And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother.

16 And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people.

17 And this rumour of him went forth throughout all Judaea, and throughout all the region round about.

* In the Drinker edition, the soprano recitative and chorale are a single movement; in the NBA and other scores, the recitative is the second movement and the chorale the third.