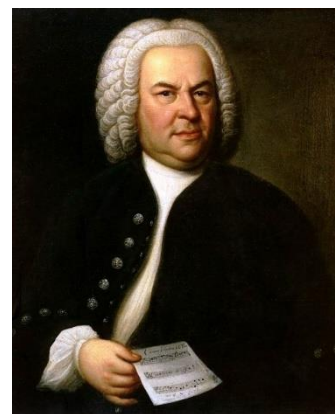


History of Music – Bach’s Cantatas

Apart from composing keyboard music, Passions and concerti, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) wrote over 200 church cantatas.

These cantatas were written for weekly services at St Thomas Church (Thomaskirche) in Leipzig. Bach’s music was integrated into the service, and the music and words normally had a thematic link to the Gospel for that week. They were written for choir, with an orchestra of strings, continuo (accompaniment), oboes, bassoons, sometimes with flutes, trumpets, timpani on special occasions. The Cantatas featured choruses, solo arias, recitative and instrumental passages. The cantatas included a chorale, a hymn that the congregation would join in with.



Cantata 140, Wachet Auf (1731)

This cantata was written for the 27th Sunday after Trinity in 1731.

“The cantata and sacred concerto were the result of exploiting the expressive devices of opera without the need for (often prohibitively expensive) staging. Like the opera, these forms employed an alteration of recitative and aria combined to narrate a single dramatic story.

‘Typically for one or two solo voices...with an instrumental basso continuo group, they...allowed [a] focus on the single monadic line against a harmonic bass. Though the term ‘cantata’ is today more often associated with sacred texts, the early cantata was just as likely to be on secular themes’ (Johnson, 2009, 64)

The opening, middle and last movements are based on an earlier hymn text and melody, ‘Wachet auf, ruft uns die Steimme’ by Philipp Nicolai.

Wa - chet auf, ruft uns die Stim - me, Der Wach - ter sehr_ hoch
 5 Mit - ter - nacht heisst die - se Stun - de, Sie ru - fen uns_ mit

auf der Zin - ne, Wach auf, du Stadt Je - ru - sa - lem:
 9 hel - lem Mun - de, Wo seid ihr, klu - gen Jung - frau - en?

Wohl- auf, der Braut-gam kommt, Steht auf, die Lam - pen nehmt, Hal - le - lu - jah, Macht
 15 euch be - reit zur_ Hochs-zeits- freud, Ihr mus - set ihm ent - ge - gen - geh'n.

In the first movement, Bach splits up the original hymn tune (A/B) and combines it with his own themes.

1–16	17–53	53–69	69–105	105–116	117–189	189–205
Bach’s themes	Hymn line A	Bach’s themes	Hymn line A	Bach’s themes	Hymn line B	Bach’s themes

Your Turn...

1. How should we sing Bach?

Historians continue to debate the specifics of the performances, including how many singers would have sung each part. This has been a very heated discussion and has led to very different recordings of the same pieces. Compare different versions of the first movement of Cantata BWV 140 'Wachet auf'. Here are two versions led by [Joshua Rifkin](#) and [Karl Richter](#). [Score available here](#).

	Rifkin	Richter
Tempo		
Performance Style		
Orchestration		
Vocal style		

- Which do you prefer, and why?
- Should we perform it the way that Bach did? If so, why?
- How do we judge a more successful interpretation of historical music?

Email your thoughts to tim.summers@rhul.ac.uk or arrange a meeting once you join Royal Holloway to discuss this more. We'll also examine this in the history modules more, too.

2. Your piano is out of tune... No, seriously, it is...

Baroque tuning is different from modern tuning. A modern 'A₄' in the middle of the piano keyboard is 440Hz. Typical baroque tuning is closer to 415Hz. But it gets more complicated than that....

The lowest A on the piano is 27.5 Hz. This is A₀. What frequency is A₇?

- To make a note sound an octave higher, double the frequency.

A ₀	A ₁	A ₂	A ₃	A ₄	A ₅	A ₆	A ₇
27.5							

- To make a note sound a fifth higher, multiply it by 1.5

A ₀	E	B	F#	C#	G#	E _b	B _b	F	C	G	D	A ₇
27.5												

This causes issues when we try to modulate, so there are different tuning systems (temperaments) to make it fit. Here's an example of one solution – having a different key for the flat or sharp.

Other tuning systems abound, for example [this one](#) or [this one](#). Different keys would sound different.

Modern pianos split the difference (equal temperament) so all the notes are out of tune. It loses the effect of different keys and modulation sounding more or less in tune.

Bach wrote two books, called the Well-Tempered Clavier (1722, 1740) to demonstrate possibilities of playing in all keys on an instrument tuned in near-equal temperament. Historical testimony suggests that Bach tuned his own keyboards and had his own tuning system that enabled distant modulation.

- What do you notice about [this performance of the Chromatic Fantasia](#) in meantone, one of the tuning systems PRIOR to Bach?
- [And here it is in Bach's tuning](#)
- [And in Equal Temperament](#)

Q. Can you hear the difference? If so, what is it? What do we gain/lose by having Equal Temperament as standard?

Q. Why do you think there's been reluctance to really engage with microtonal music [like this](#)? What's your reaction to this piece and instrument?

Let us know what you think!