

The Memorial Church of Harvard University Music Notes for Sunday, October 9, 2022

There are few musical forms that have endured and flourished as the motet, which has been in continuous existence since the twelfth century. Johann's Sebastian Bach's examples in the genre are pinnacles of the choral literature; indeed, of all Bach's vocal works, the motets are the only category that continued in an unbroken tradition of performance from the composer's time to the present day. *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf*, BWV 226, was written for the funeral of the veteran headmaster of the Thomasschule (where Bach worked as a somewhat reluctant schoolmaster), Johann Heinrich Ernesti, which took place in the University Church of St. Paul on October 16, 1729. The motet is cast in three main sections: the text of the first two coming from the longest of the Pauline Epistles, *Romans*; the final section is the third strophe of Martin Luther's Pentecost chorale, *Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott*. The work opens with a dancing, airy, melismatic figure that surrounds the listener with the comfort and aid of the Holy Spirit; Bach exploits the antiphonal possibilities of the double-choir formation to great dramatic effect. "Denn wir wissen nicht" is appropriately portrayed through the staggered entrances of the choirs; the *affekt* changes on the words "sondern der Geist," where more angular and broken up lines represent the "unutterable sighs." The choirs unite for a confident and affirming fugue, "Der aber die Herzen," full of optimism and fortitude, and the work closes with Bach's gorgeous setting of Luther's chorale.

During Bach's tenure as organist of the Ducal court at Weimar (1708–1717), the composer undertook a study of the music of Vivaldi, in part by transcribing his concertos for organ; today's prelude is Bach's arrangement of Vivaldi's *Concerto Grosso in D minor*, RV 565, for two violins and cello. Bach fills in the harmony and expands the texture, as well as adding melodic ornamentation; unusually, the work is very specific in its markings concerning registration.

The chorale prelude—a liturgical composition based on an existing hymn melody—figures prominently throughout Bach's oeuvre; today's postlude is based around the same chorale that was heard at the end of the motet. Written for full organ, the ecstatic, energetic sixteenth-notes in the manuals continue uninterrupted throughout the work as the pedal declaims the chorale theme in thundering long notes.