Ein Feste Burg ist Unser Gott J. S Bach

Wider listening

Composers for comparison:

Buxtehude

Handel

Telemann

Vivaldi

Stölzel

Steffani

Context:

* J. S. Bach, 1685-1750
* Ein Feste Burg was written (or adapted from an earlier cantata) for the Reformation Day Feast on the 31st of October sometime between 1727 and 1731.
* In Bach’s time, the German Church was Lutheran (a form of Protestantism developed by Martin Luther in the early 16th century). This affected the religious music that Bach wrote:
* One of the key features of Protestantism was the involvement of the entire congregation in worship, so contrary to previous custom where the Church services were in Latin, they were now in the vernacular, German. This also applied to all of Bach’s compositions. The entire congregation also sang simple hymn tunes called chorales rather than just listening to the church choir so that they would be more involved in the service.
* However, they also performed cantatas as part of the church service which were composed by the *Kapellmeister* of the large churches and cathedrals. Bach held several roles as organist and church director in his career, but is most famous for being the *Thomaskantor*, the cantor of the *Thomasschule* at the *Thomaskirche* in Leipzig.
* The cantata included choruses, solo arias, duets recitatives and chorales and were accompanied by orchestra.
* Ein Feste Burg is a chorale cantata which means it is a cantata based on a chorale tune, in this case a Lutheran chorale by the same name.

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Melody

Wider listening by element

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| Bach Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme (cantata) | * Mvt 1 uses the famous chorale tune “Zion hort die Wachtersingen”. The string orchestra play the main melodic material while the basses sing the chorale melody as a cantus firmus as in mvt 1 of Ein Feste Burg (EFB). * Mvt 6 is a soprano and bass duet, “Mein Freund ist Mein”. Melodies are florid and decorative with melismatic word setting. * The duet writing allows the soloists to demonstrate vocal ability as well as explore a particular emotion. |
| Mendelssohn symphony no.5, “Reformation”, mvt 4 | * Written to celebrate 300 years of the Augsburg Confession, the assembly which had defined the key doctrine of the Lutheran Church in Germany, hence the title “Reformation”. * The fourth and final movement also uses the Ein Feste Burg chorale melody as a cantus firmus and treats the melody in a similar way. |
| Britten St Nicholas cantata | * This cantata tells the story of St Nicholas. * The last movement is The Death of Nicholas. The tenor sings a final melody while the chorus chants the Nunc Dimittis using the Gregorian fourth tone. Similar to the cantus firmus in mvt 2 of Ein Feste Burg. * The cantata closes with a congregational hymn praising God’s mystery and the courage of the saints. The hymn tune is the London New, “God moves in a Mysterious Way”. This is similar to the ending of EFB which finishes with a congregational chorale praising God. This final chorale is called a “Schlusschoral”. |
| Buxtehude Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ | * A chorale fantasia written for organ. * The melody is extended and elaborated in a polyphonic texture, and each phrase or the chorale is treated differently to reflect the meaning of the words. |
| Bach St Matthew Passion | * It’s a larger scale work than a cantata, but still includes choruses, arias, recitatives and chorales. * Here, Bach uses the Passion chorale melody differently; rather than using the melody as a basis for elaboration or incorporating it into the rest of the melodic material, the chorale returns throughout the piece, set differently each time. |

Structure/form

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| Bach Orgelbüchlein | * Many of the chorale preludes in the Orgelbüchlein are chorale fantasias for organ. Mvt 1 of EFB is a chorale fantasia, but Bach wrote them for other occasions than cantatas. |
| Britten St Nicholas cantata | * Ends with a congregational hymn as the last movement, as in EFB. (see melody section) |
| Stölzel 6 cantatas for Pentecost | * No. 1 Werdet voll Geistes, last movement is a chorale. * Most of these six cantatas begin with a four-part chorus. The first sections are homophonic, moving into a fugal section to close. |
| Bach cantatas | * First movements are often chorale fantasias, i.e. intricate music based on a chorale tune. |

Harmony/tonality

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| Bach Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme (cantata) | * Harmony is functional and diatonic like most baroque music with a strong focus on primary chords but equally highly modulatory. * Diminished chords are reserved for the most expressive moments: * The bass recit. in this cantata, “So geh herein zu mir”, uses a diminished chord under the word “sorrowful” (“betrübtes”), moving to an augmented German 6th chord. In EFB, diminished chords and minor keys are used to the same effect. |

Texture

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| Buxtehude Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ | * Polyphonic treatment of chorale melody (see melody) |
| Mendelssohn symphony no.5, mvt 4 | * The chorale melody is first heard stated homophonically before being treated in variation. It then appears in different parts of the texture as well as cantus firmus style on top of other melodic material. |
| Stölzel 6 cantatas for Pentecost | * Polyphonic sections (see structure above) |
| Bach Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme (cantata) | * Baroque arias in cantatas are usually accompanied by orchestra and an *obbligato* instrument which would weave in and out of the soloist’s melodies. This creates a texture of heterophony, polyphony or polyphonically-animated homophony depending. In EFB there is heterophony between the sop and oboe in mvt 2. * Mvt 6, “Mein Freund ist Mein” (see melody): the obbligato oboe weaves around the soloist’s music. It is often in imitation with the soprano, or plays its introductory material on top of the singers’ lines. |

Sonority/Dynamics

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| Bach Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme (cantata) | * Mvt 6: oboe was a common obbligato instrument because of its piercing sonority, allowing it to be heard over an entire orchestra. In EFB mvt 1, the oboes play the cantus firmus over the rest of the orchestra. |
| Stölzel 6 cantatas for Pentecost | * These cantatas are directed to be performed one to a part, even in the chorus - this creates a much less imposing sonority than the larger choir used in Bach’s cantata. * It is accompanied by strings, two horns and obbligato oboe. |

Tempo/metre/rhythm

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| Stölzel Werdet voll Geistes (cantata) | * The tenor aria “Was saust so sanft”: the blowing of the Holy Spirit is illustrated by a motif of one short and one long note - another example of text illustration. |
| Bach Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme (cantata) | * Mvt 6: semiquavers in virtuosic solo parts. |
| Bach St Matthew Passion | * Part 1: the choir of boys sing hymn tune “O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig”, sustained above the rest of the music. The note values are longer than the other musical material which allows it to be heard. In EFB mvt 1 the cantus firmus is played slowly on top of the busy continuous quavers underneath. |