

[Working Paper] “Musical Perfection”: Reflecting on the Contemporary and Timeless Bach Chorales



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Frank completed undergraduate studies in piano, a master’s in ethnomusicology, and a doctorate in worship studies at the Webber Institute, where he now directs the Institute’s GROW (Global Renewal of Worship). Frank co-authored *All the World Is Singing: Glorifying God Through the Worship Music of the Nations*, and co-edited *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. The Fortunatos are based at the OM USA headquarters in Tyrone, Georgia, and reside in Peachtree City, Georgia.

Back in my college days, as a piano major with an interest in music theory, I relished studying and playing Bach chorales. Over the years, I would pull down my chorales book, choose a starting point, and play through several pages, intent on sharpening my sight reading. To me, the chorales never grew old or sounded dated. This amazing collection of more than 350 biblically rich hymns, mostly from centuries-old German Lutheran hymn collections, has trained generations of musicians in various principles of musicianship. Biographies of J. S. Bach describe his lifetime connection to these Lutheran hymns and to Luther’s ideal—that people would not only be *present* in worship but for “their faith to erupt into song” (Schalk and Halter 1978, 16). Bach poured amazing musical creativity into these chorales. Most of these hymns were part of the weekly cantatas Bach wrote for church services. After his father’s death, Carl Philip Emanuel Bach collated the chorales from the more than 200 church cantatas, for music study purposes.

While J. S. Bach arranged and performed his chorale arrangements as a church musician, he also taught music through his entire lifetime, using the chorales to teach principles of harmony and composition. Bach scholar



Christoph Wolff explains their distinctiveness as an “integration of the chorale melody in a four-part polyphonic fabric . . . [with] the merging of harmony and counterpoint . . . whereby the most unusual chord progressions might be rendered plausible within the narrowest context” (1994, 388–89).

Bach scholars are effusive in their admiration of the chorales. Malcolm Boyd writes that “they [the chorales] explore an astonishing variety of harmonic progression with faultless part-writing” (1999, 93). Robert L. Marshall and Robin Leaver put it aptly: “His four-part chorale harmonizations in particular . . . may be the most important event in the history of the chorale since the Reformation” (quoted in Dahn n.d.). Bach’s arrangements inevitably made their way into hymnals. Two of the most well-known in English hymnals are “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” and “A Mighty Fortress.” Some American and British hymnals include as many as a dozen of the chorales.

As a church musician leading congregational worship mostly in contemporary church settings, the chorales seemed like an esoteric collection that had little, if any, connection to present-day contemporary church contexts. But my instincts told me that I needed to stay tethered to these remarkable gems for my own musical enrichment and enjoyment—whether or not I could find a way to adapt them for use in contemporary congregational settings.

I started a conversation about the chorales with some of my friends who taught college music theory. They applauded my interest and confirmed my cautious feeling that it would be an uphill battle discussing the place of the chorales in congregational worship with contemporary worship musicians. As I began to consider writing something about Bach and his chorales, I felt the intimidation that any musician has in attempting to write about Bach. Wolff says, “writing knowledgeably and responsibly on virtually any aspect of Bach and his music is one of the more arduous and perplexing tasks in the business of musical scholarship. . . . On the other hand . . . there hardly exists a more fascinating and rewarding subject in the history of art than the music of Bach” (1994, ix). Remembering Albert Einstein’s famous utterance didn’t help me: “This is what I have to say about Bach—listen, play, love, revere—and keep your trap shut” (quoted in Burton-Hill 2014). With some timidity, therefore, I will ignore Einstein’s advice and share some of my admiration and joy in the Bach chorales.

My admiration begins with the composer himself. Like many other musicians, I place Bach in the top spot within the pantheon of composers. The late choral conductor Robert Shaw went further, suggesting that Bach might be the “single greatest creative genius” in the “whole history of the Western world” (quoted in Westermeyer 2007). Given that this greatest musician of all time left us a resource that has catalyzed the

training of generations of musicians, the chorales probably belong in the libraries of each generation of worship musicians.

Despite the many changes in musical styles in the church over the years, studying the chorales can expand and recalibrate our musicianship. It can be a deep dive into a different realm of music, the way snorkeling opens up a totally different realm underwater. Even simply reading through the theologically charged lyrics could inspire new angles in expressing biblical truths.

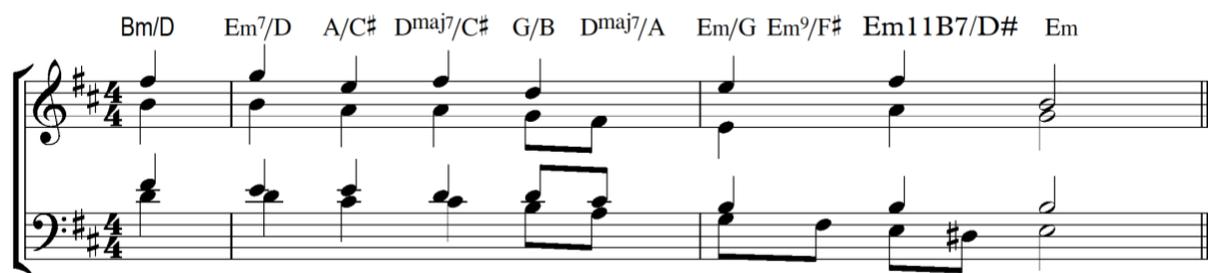


Figure 1. Excerpt from "In Thee Alone, Lord Jesus Christ" ("Allein zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ"), BWV 261.

People who delve into the chorales marvel at the way Bach added bass, then alto and tenor, to create four moving parts that sound together to create astonishingly beautiful music. With my personal interest in harmony, I also marvel at Bach’s fleeting moments of modern-sounding chords, including major- and minor seventh chords, ninth chords, and an endless use of suspensions. I delight to play the occasional tone clusters resulting from inversions of seventh or ninth chords. These enriched chordal movements continue to give the chorales a contemporary and timeless sound. I often stop playing in the middle of a chorale and stare with amazement at unexpected—and to my ears, daring—chord changes, cadences, or voice movement.



Figure 2. Excerpt from "Christ, He Is My Life" ("Christus, der ist mein Leben"), BWV 282. The word being sung in this passage is "sterben" ("to die").

I started counting the accidentals in one chorale and discovered that Bach used the entire set of chromatic pitches as he moved through temporary key changes—all within one hymn! Luke Dahn mentions at least six

bombs, military strategists still study battles from the past to develop strategic principles. Music then draws an obvious connection to the contemporary church, asserting that musicians need to connect to great music of the past to develop solid principles of musicianship.

Music explains that most churches look for musicians who are aware of both traditional music of the past and present-day trends. He argues that “popular musical styles will change, often quite rapidly. The student who has studied or knows only the current idiom will be less likely to adapt to the change than one who has received a broad-based musical education.” Reading this, I concluded that music education should include the chorales.

I then came across similar convictions from church music professor Paul Westermeyer:

Worship leaders often use contemporary musical styles in the belief that the gospel can be more easily communicated to worshipers through music that is familiar. But the gospel is not only about the familiar. It also brings a message that is profoundly unfamiliar, countercultural, and different from anything we can imagine. No style of music, historic or contemporary, can completely encompass this countercultural reality. Music from the past, however, helps to protect us from ourselves, keeps us from being overly insular, and gives us insights our period cannot supply. A healthy church employs the music of its own time as well as music from the past. . . . J. S. Bach composed some of the best music of all time, much of it for the worship of the church. Why avoid such a treasure? (2007)

Westermeyer may have intended his question rhetorically, but there are obvious reasons why musicians might avoid Bach and his chorales. A sojourn into Bach territory demands musical training. Dutch author Evert Willem Schallenberg commented, “Bach demands concentration on the part of both performers and listeners, and it is only gradually that one learns to understand their spirit” (1949, 27). Bach’s chorales were never meant to be sung by a congregation; they are too harmonically complex. Understandably, worship leaders without formal music training may find them daunting. Despite the limitations, however, with creativity the chorales could find a place in contemporary worship services. Here are some ways to incorporate the chorales into new contexts:

- A keyboardist plays a chorale as an instrumental prelude, offertory, or postlude.
- A brass or string ensemble plays a chorale during a service. (Various arrangements are available.)
- Use chorales as solos during communion services, or during Advent, Christmas, New Year, Lenten, and other special days of the church year.

- Choirs “retune” a hymn lyric, replacing lesser-known chorale lyrics with well-known lyrics from hymnals that have matching meter.
- Prepare recordings of the chorales with piano or electric keyboard sounds layered with strings or pad sounds to create devotional “soundscape” versions for preludes in church or for internet use.
- For personal enrichment, practice playing the chorales to increase sight-reading and develop legato playing with careful pedaling.
- Study music theory with the chorales. Internet sites specialize in using the chorales as part of theory courses.
- For a fun, interactive exposure to the Bach chorales, or to introduce the chorales to students in a more interactive way, download the Bach Chorales software from PG Music, makers of the popular Band-in-a-Box software.² The two volumes of this feature-rich software will keep users intrigued by the many ways to interact with the chorales. For each volume of 28 chorales, professional solo singers recorded English-translation lyrics on separate tracks. This provides a way to learn the chorales by listening to all four parts either simultaneously or independently. Chorales can be played as audio or midi tracks. While listening to the chorale in the music notation mode, a box moves from measure to measure in the score. The user can also choose to listen and follow just one of the four parts. The notated music includes chord symbols. A mixer allows complete soloing, muting, volume, and panning capabilities for each voice part. Each chorale can be played in different keys, or in the original key at half speed for in-depth study. Other tools include the ability to scroll (scrub) through each beat forward and backward. Any section of the chorale can be looped for continuous playback. For singing enjoyment or sight-reading practice, the application recommends muting your voice part and joining the group by singing along. Each chorale prints with large music and lyric fonts. Separate parts can be transposed and printed, thus allowing the user to prepare scores for ensemble playing for brass, woodwinds, or any instrumental combination. Either of these two volumes could function as a mini-course in the Bach chorales for classroom use or provide many hours of personal entertainment using resources from one of the most timeless collections in the history of music.

Bach kept composing and revising his compositions right up to his final days on earth. Before Bach died he lost his eyesight. During his final week on earth, he thought of a particular chorale, substituting the words, “Before Your Throne I Now Appear,” (English translation), a prayer hymn first published in 1646. No historical evidence

² <http://www.pgmusic.com/bachchorales.htm>.

conclusively confirms his last musical act on earth, but Bach may in fact have dictated final edits to the chorale. The chorale says:³

Before your throne I now appear,
O God, and bid you humbly,
Turn not your gracious face
From me, a poor sinner.

Confer on me a blessed end,
On the last day awaken me,
Lord, that I may see you eternally,
Amen, amen, hear me.

One of Christoph Wolff's landmark books on Bach includes a fascinating epilogue, "Bach and the Idea of 'Musical Perfection'" (2001, 466–72). Other authors also speak of Bach's perfection, using phrases like "godlike" to describe his craft. Whether or not heaven itself will use the music of earth, and particularly Bach, no one knows. What we do know, however, is that the Bach chorales may likely be with us right up to our final moments on earth.

³ Bach scholars refer to this chorale as his "deathbed chorale." Various translations are available. See <https://mereinkling.net/2015/04/28/bachs-deathbed-hymn/>.

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Appendix: Resources for the Bach chorales

For anyone looking for online resources about the chorales, here are some places to start:

- <https://ia800501.us.archive.org/35/items/371ChoraleHarmonisations/371ChoraleHarmonisationspart1-Satb.pdf>. This site presents 101 chorales from one of the historic editions, without lyrics, and with only a German title.
- <http://scores.ccarh.org/bach/chorale/chorales.pdf>. These 185 chorales are available in “open score” to study each voice part on a separate music staff. The soprano part includes one verse in German.
- http://www.pjb.com.au/mus/arr/us/satb_chorales.pdf. This site has a piano edition of 40 chorales, prepared by Peter Billam.
- <http://www.lukedahn.net/BachPage.htm> and <http://www.bach-chorales.com/Articles.htm>. On these sites, Luke Dahn has prepared very useful comparative studies of specific chorales. Dahn collated various chorales with the same melody, transposing them into the same key to facilitate study of Bach’s compositional nuances.
- <http://www.bachscholar.com/>. Pianists and Skype teachers Cory and Marilyn Hall share YouTube examples, articles, and many downloadable chorale resources. As mentioned in my paper, Cory Hall demonstrated his passion for the chorales by playing an extended all-chorale recital one Lenten season. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOdQVg2sa24>.
- For less-skilled pianists, Hall offers downloadable resources with just the soprano and bass parts. Students can then advance to four-part chorales as they gain confidence.

Print versions of the chorales are available in various formats. Those with lyrics:

- *J. S. Bach Chorales, A New Comprehensive Edition*, edited by Luke Dahn. This spiral-bound edition is one of the most comprehensive. You can download a sample of the book at http://www.bachchorales.com/PDF/Bach_Chorales_Dahn_Edition_Sample.pdf. Download the complete compilation at www.bach-chorales.com. Dahn prepared his edition primarily for researchers and scholars, and for use in college theory classes. Each chorale page includes extensive contextual information, along with the German texts. There are abundant, comprehensive appendices. The Dahn edition lists the chorales by the International Bach Catalog system, called BWV: “The Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis” (Bach Works Catalogue). Dahn’s exhaustive Bach chorales website includes links to every chorale.

- *The Four-Part Chorales of J. S. Bach. (2 volumes). With German text and English translations. (Facsimile, 1929)*, by Charles Sanford Terry. This scholarly edition presents the chorales alphabetically by German titles. Each chorale includes texts in German and in English translation. Historians will appreciate the inclusion of prefaces of earlier chorales editions going back over two centuries. Terry's appendices include exhaustive background of the text and music of each chorale. This edition includes a very useful topical listing of chorales by seasons of the church year, and an index meters. Worship musicians could create a useful Christmas or Lenten solo by using, for instance, a chorale tune in a certain meter and substituting words from a well-known hymnal Christmas text with the same meter. Terry's edition comes in two volumes. People wanting to play the chorales will find it helpful to have a printer remove the spines and make a combined, three-ring, loose-leaf notebook version.
- *Complete Book of Bach Chorales*. Anyone preferring a collection of the chorales with English hymn lyrics only might consider this Mel Bay publication, edited by Jerry Silverman. The edition includes a very useful listing of "Chorales Appropriate to Certain Occasions." Tap into this handy index to prepare special music throughout the year, and for other occasions such as communion and baptism. Print and ebook versions available at <http://www.melbay.com/Products/96472EB/complete-book-of-bach-chorales.aspx>.
- *101 Chorales Harmonized by Johann Sebastian Bach*. Compiled and edited by Walter E. Buszin (Schmitt, Hall & McCreary, Minneapolis). This all-English collection uses large, bold music fonts, suitable for singing or playing. The compilation is based on the church year and also includes a topical index for various occasions and seasons.

Print versions without text:

- The most inexpensive and popular edition is the Riemenschneider, with more than one million copies sold. It's more for study than for performance, and uses smaller music fonts. The resource is available from numerous websites.
- *J. S. Bach—413 Chorales, and J. S. Bach—413 Chorales: Analyzed*. <http://bachchoraleharmony.com>. Christopher Czarnecki has released these two spiral-bound collections. Both editions use large music fonts for easier playing. One version includes only the music, and the Analyzed edition presents the music with chord names (letters) above the staff and Roman-numeral chord symbols below. The Roman numerals reveal proper chord inversions, whereas the chord symbols above the staff have only the letter name of the chord but do not show which inversion is used. (For instance, a first-inversion F chord has only F, instead of the more useful F/A.) Not all theory teachers will agree with every analysis, but theory novices will find this comprehensive annotated chord version invaluable. Like other

publications, the Czernicki editions include useful indexes. Each version is available at <http://bachchoraleharmony.com/>.