

Consensus

Volume 43
Issue 1 *The Diaconal Church: Anglican and
Lutheran Perspectives*

Article 10

1-25-2022

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Recommended Citation

Uitti, Roger W. (2022) "BWV 37," *Consensus*: Vol. 43: Iss. 1, Article 10.

DOI: 10.51644/EWSH3718

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol43/iss1/10>

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BWV 37

Roger W. Uitti¹

A special gift arrived in Eisenach on March 21, 1685 (March 31, O.S). It was the birth of Lutheran musician Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). In Phil Goulding's book's ranking of the 50 greatest composers, Bach stands number one. He was not an inventor of new musical form, not a spontaneous Mozart, not a bombastic Beethoven, nor any avant-garde Stravinsky, but he remains the consummate grand master of Baroque technique and sensitivities. His 200 sacred cantatas are but one dimension of his musical genius. They present us all with an opportunity to relish a worthy bit of our musical Lutheran heritage. Preachers, beware! This is sermonic material.

During this COVID-19 epidemic, you might imitate me and sit down to one of his sacred cantatas for your own spiritual enrichment once each Sunday. You could do so either on line (Bach Cantatas website, Bach Cantatas on Wikipedia) or through recordings by Nicolaus Harnoncourt, Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Ton Koopman, or as I have been doing, by listening to the CD recordings of Helmuth Rilling from his *Das gesamte Kantatenwerk*, each cantata there supplied with an introduction and text in German, English, French, or Spanish. Bach himself did not write the librettos therein but he strategically chose and arranged them to support the Scripture lessons for the day and sermon text, with the goal to preach Christ effectively through music. An example of one libretto that might pique your interest is Bach's ***Wer da gläubet und getauft wird, der wird selig werden*** (Whoever so believes and is baptized will be blessed, BWV 37).

This cantata was composed in Leipzig for the Feast of Ascension, May 18, 1724. The Gospel reading for the day was Mark 16:14ff., where Jesus commands us to go forth, preach, and baptize. Interestingly, while normally one would focus on Christ's own ascension, Bach focuses on our own personal one-day ascension in this *aria* sung by the bass that day:

Der Glaube schafft der Seele Flügel
dass sie sich in den Himmel schwingt,
die Taufe ist das Gnadensiegel,
das uns den Segen Gottes bringt;
und daher heist ein selger Christ,
wer gläubet und getauft ist.

Faith fashions wings for the soul
that might soar up to heaven,
baptism is the seal of grace
that brings us God's blessing;
and hence a Christian is called blessed
who believes and is baptized.²

It may well be that the typical cantata format of opening chorus, recitative, aria, recitative or arioso, aria, and closing chorale, sung by soprano, alto, tenor, bass, with finale four-part chorus, accompanied by wind, string, and brass instruments, timpani, and organ, may be completely foreign to our contemporary ears and likings. Yet even today a great many might appreciate the bounce and the strong rhythmic pulse that runs through so much of

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² This German text, with English translation (English-10, 2017) by Tobin Schmuck, New York City, has been taken from the free Bach Cantatas website, and is included here with the translator's permission. <https://bach-cantatas.com/Texts/BWV37-Eng10.htm>.

Bach's musical notation. Is my wife correct to think that he grew up listening to the strong beat of a mill's water wheel?

J.S. Bach was clearly a man of deep faith and conviction. He knew how to celebrate a religious occasion. He had the ability and insight to make the texts for the day speak comfort and reassurance to his audience. Swedish Lutheran Archbishop of Lars Olaf Jonathan Söderblom (1866-1931) rightly called Bach's sacred cantatas "the Fifth Gospel."