

Chorale-Based Compositions

(Johann Sebastian Bach)

The Chorale

- ▶ The chorale is a four part setting of a Lutheran hymn
- ▶ Lutheran chorales tend to have simple and singable tunes, because they were intended to be sung by the whole congregation in German
- ▶ Some of these chorales were written by Martin Luther himself (such as *A Mighty Fortress*)
- ▶ Many of the harmonizations that are used today were written by J.S. Bach, although he did not write many chorale melodies—these had been around for some time

Chorale-based compositions

- ▶ Chorale melodies were often used as the basis for other types of sacred compositions
- ▶ Two common chorale-based compositions are the *chorale prelude* (for organ), and the *chorale cantata* (for choir and instruments)
- ▶ Often the chorale tune is used as a *cantus firmus* around which the other voices move
- ▶ People in the congregation were very familiar with these chorale melodies (and their associated texts) and could easily recognize them in these other compositions

The chorale prelude

- ▶ A chorale prelude is a polyphonic work for organ that uses a chorale tune as a *cantus firmus*
- ▶ The tune is usually quite audible, played in slow, even notes on one of the organ manuals or in the pedals
- ▶ Some think that chorale preludes were used to introduce the hymn that was about to be sung by the congregation
- ▶ The quicker-moving voices are often related to the *cantus firmus* voice, sometimes using inversion, retrograde, and other techniques
- ▶ Bach wrote 46 chorale preludes, which are collected in his *Orgelbüchlein* (“Little Organ Book”)

The chorale cantata

- ▶ In Bach’s day, the cantata was a sacred composition for voices and instruments, performed each Sunday as part of the Lutheran church service (just before the sermon)
- ▶ The text of the cantata was typically planned to coincide with the topic of the day’s sermon
 - ▶ These topics were laid out in a year-long cycle, forming a *liturgy*
- ▶ In some of Bach’s cantatas, all of the movements are based on the same chorale tune—these highly unified works are called *chorale cantatas*
- ▶ Even when all of the movements are not based on the same chorale tune, the opening and closing movements normally are, with recitatives, arias, and duets in between