

# 11

## Music for Spiritual Expression

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### INTRODUCTION

Religious practitioners around the world have long used music to express their spiritual convictions. Music plays a particularly significant role in the context of worship. This is hardly surprising: Music has the power to encourage a wide variety of emotional states, ranging from meditative calm to frenzied excitement. It can help participants in worship to feel close to each other and to their deity. It also aids in the memorization and communal recitation of texts, which often define religious practice. Individual creative artists also draw inspiration from their religious convictions, even if the music they produce is not intended for the purpose of facilitating worship.

In this chapter, we will explore a variety of examples related to Christian worship and beliefs. The focus on Christianity is the result of the Western and classical bias of this text. Christianity has been the dominant religion of Europe since the 4th century, when it was legalized by the Roman emperor Constantine the Great. Most of the influential composers in the classical tradition belonged to Christian denominations, and many wrote beautiful music for use in church services. As a result, church music through the ages has both reflected and shaped broader musical practices. The stylistic variety of this music is nearly infinite. This variety results from the combined forces of general musical taste, the requirements of religious authorities, and the needs and histories of congregations.

This chapter will be dedicated to the examination of worship music from different eras. Although today we are more likely to hear most of this music in concert halls or on recordings, much of it was first intended for practical use in church services. To understand how this music came to be and what it meant in its time and place, we will consider each example in its religious context.

### HILDEGARD OF BINGEN, "O STRENGTH OF WISDOM"

Histories of European music almost always begin with the chants that were used in medieval Catholic churches. This is for the simple reason that **Gregorian chant**, as it is most commonly known, was the first music to be written down using the early form of staff notation from which modern musical notation is descended.

As such, it is the earliest European music to have been preserved, and therefore the earliest music that is available for close examination.

## Gregorian Chant

Gregorian chant constitutes an enormous body of music for use in Catholic worship services. In musical terms, it is fairly simple to characterize. The rhythms of Gregorian chant are determined by the natural stresses of the text, and it therefore does not have a regular pulse or meter. The melodies tend to have a small range and feature conjunct motion, making them accessible to untrained singers. Gregorian chants are often in modes other than major and minor, which can make them sound unusual to modern ears. Finally, Gregorian chants are **monophonic**, meaning that each was written down as a single, unaccompanied vocal line to be sung by a group in unison or by a soloist. (Although we know that countermelodies and accompaniments were often improvised, these were not recorded using notation.)

The name “Gregorian chant” derives from a popular legend concerning the origins of this body of music. According to tradition, the Holy Spirit regularly visited Pope Gregory I in the form of a dove so as to impart divine wisdom. Following the unification of state and church powers as the Holy Roman Empire in 800, the entire body of chant began to be attributed to Gregory, and was thereafter named for him. This attribution—which was taken as fact by most believers—served an important purpose, for it suggested that the style of chant preferred in Rome came straight from God. However, there are some problems with this story. The practices of Gregorian chant predated Gregory I, who served as Pope from 590 to 604, by centuries, and it continued to grow and develop long after his reign. In fact, it is today considered unlikely that Gregory I contributed anything to the repertoire that bears his name.

The use of chant is common across many religious traditions. Within Christianity, there are a variety of chant styles, including Russian Orthodox chant, the Byzantine chant of Greece, Ethiopian Orthodox chant, and Anglican chant. In Judaism, congregants chant from the Torah. In Islam, the call to prayer is chanted five times a day from the minaret of the mosque. In Buddhism, monks chant together to facilitate their meditative practice. In Hinduism, practitioners chant when they perform religious rituals in the home. All of these forms of chant have elements in common, due to the fact that each uses the human voice to sound a sacred text on an occasion of great solemnity.



**Image 11.1:** This 12th-century manuscript illumination shows the Holy Spirit, in the form of the dove, whispering into the ear of Pope Gregory I.

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**Image 11.2: These Buddhist monks are chanting as part of a religious ceremony.**

Source: Flickr

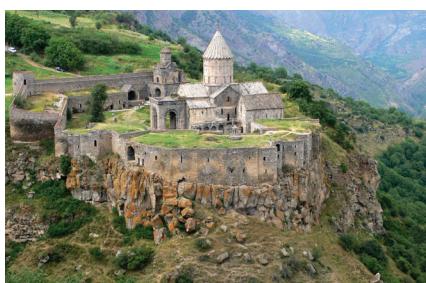
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Gregorian chant began to develop in the Benedictine monasteries of Italy, the first of which was founded by St. Benedict of Nursia in 529. All monks and nuns withdraw from the world to dedicate their lives to God by means of regular prayer and humble living. Those belonging to Benedictine orders live according to the Rule of St. Benedict, a book that describes the organization of monasteries and monastic life. In particular, the Rule of St. Benedict punctuates each day with eight worship services known as the **Canonical Hours**. Each of the Hours has a different purpose and contents, but all include the chanting of Psalms—all 150 of which are chanted each week. The Hours also include other types of chant, the texts of which are in Latin and are primarily derived from the Bible.

But why chant? All of these texts could just as easily be recited. What does the act of singing contribute to the worship experience? There are a number of

good reasons for which monks began to chant. To begin with, the act of communal singing creates a shared physical experience. Participants breathe together and their heart rates begin to coordinate. Singing also has a calming effect. In addition, singing helps with the memorization of text. Although monastics were often literate and had access to books, they did not usually read words (or music) in the context of worship. Books were valuable and rare, and were reserved for close study, not daily use. Singing also helps words to carry through a large space—such as the cavernous interior of a medieval church. Finally, singing helped the monks to stay awake. Monastic life



**Image 11.3: Monasteries, like this 9th-century example in Armenia, were often built in remote locations so that monks and nuns could fully remove themselves from society.**

Source: Wikipedia

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allowed for very little sleep, and several of the Canonical Hours took place when most would rather be in bed.

Benedictines and other Catholics had been chanting for centuries before any of this music was written down. The Catholic church first became concerned with recording its repertoire of chant after the founding of the Holy Roman Empire in 800. As the church spread across Europe, the authorities in Rome began to worry about losing control over distant congregations. In order to maintain centralized authority and prevent churches from breaking away, it was necessary for the **liturgy**—all of the words, music, and actions that constitute church services—to be standardized. Texts could be written down and actions described, but music remained ephemeral.

Before the development of music notation, chants were passed on and preserved by means of **oral tradition**. Practitioners would learn and memorize the music through repeated hearings. A monk or priest could then bring the chant to a distant community and teach it to the Christians there. This was risky, however, for music in the oral tradition usually changes over time and distance as individual musicians forget how it goes, commit errors, or make intentional alterations. Catholic authorities worried that the emergence of unique musical traditions would lead churches to desire independence in other ways as well.

A solution to this problem was finally recorded around 1026 by the Italian monk Guido of Arezzo. Guido sought to create a system by which monks and choristers could more easily learn Gregorian chants. To facilitate learning, he assigned syllables to the first six pitches of what today we call the scale. These syllables—ut, re, mi, fa, sol, and la—were drawn from the Latin text to a hymn, and they are still in use today (“ut” was replaced by the more singable “do” in the 17th century). He then began positioning the pitches on a lined staff that indicated their relative distance from one another. Guido’s system of notation was not quite like that in use today: His staff had only four lines, his noteheads looked quite different, and he had no way of indicating rhythms. Modern notation, however, is directly descended from this medieval invention.

Beginning in the 11th century, therefore, the melodies of Gregorian chant could be preserved on paper. Although we take musical notation for granted today, it transformed the development of music in the Western world. For the Catholic church, it offered a guarantee that Gregorian chants would be



**Image 11.4:** Although this example dates from about 200 years after Guido of Arezzo, it illustrates the principles of his music notation system.

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**Image 11.5:** This famous image from *Scivias* portrays Hildegard receiving a vision from god.

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sung in the same way across Europe. Over time, however, notation would develop to allow for the construction and preservation of increasingly complex musical structures containing many simultaneous melodies, such as we will encounter with the next example. It also allowed for composers to emerge as significant and powerful figures.

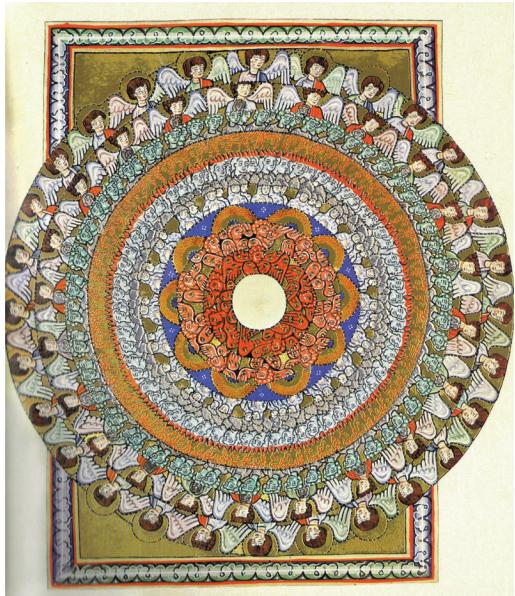
All of this took time, however, and it was typical in the medieval era for chant composers to remain uncredited and anonymous. This was in part due to the myth that assigned authorship of all chant to Pope Gregory I, and in part due to the fact that individual creativity was not highly esteemed. But there is one major exception to this rule: the abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), who not only composed dozens of extraordinary chants but also exerted far-reaching influence within the Catholic church.

## Hildegard's Extraordinary Life

Hildegard was born into a minor noble family in what is today southern Germany. As a child she was pledged to the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg—perhaps as a tithe (tradition holds that she was the tenth child), perhaps as a ploy by her parents to gain favor, or perhaps because she had experienced spiritual visions from the age of three. Hildegard was trained by Jutta, an older woman who served as abbess at the monastery and who was also an **anchor**. As such, she was permanently enclosed in a small hut adjoining the monastery. An opening allowed food to be passed in and waste to be passed out, but Jutta herself remained in place until her death in 1136.

Hildegard was elected to replace Jutta as abbess. Disibodenberg, however, was home to monks as well, and the entire community was under the authority of the abbot. Hildegard wanted greater independence for herself and her nuns, and asked that they be allowed to move to Rupertsberg. When the abbot refused her request, Hildegard went to the archbishop instead. Although the archbishop granted his permission, the abbot still refused to allow the women to depart. Hildegard then became very ill to the point of total bodily paralysis. The abbot took this to be a sign from God, and finally permitted the nuns to leave Disibodenberg. Hildegard officially founded her monastery at Rupertsberg in 1150, followed by a second at Eibingen in 1165.

At Rupertsberg, the nuns had need for only a single male monastic, who visited in order to give communion and hear confession. This monk, Volmar, also served

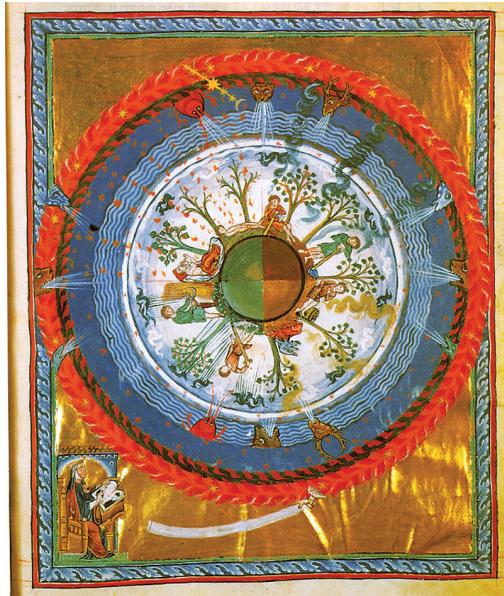


**Image 11.6:** This illumination captures Hildegard's vision of the angelic hierarchy.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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**Image 11.7:** This illustration of the earth and heavens appeared in Hildegard's third and final theological compendium, *Book of Divine Works*.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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as Hildegard's scribe and encouraged her to record her visions. She finally did so in the 1151 compendium *Scivias* (Latin for "Know the Ways"), which included rich illustrations and a number of musical compositions. This was followed by two additional volumes of theological writing. Pope Eugene III accepted Hildegard's recorded visions as church doctrine, thereby according her unusual status in the church for a woman. Hildegard also wrote on the topics of botany and medicine, created recipes, recorded church history, and invented her own secret alphabet. She was finally recognized as a Saint and Doctor of the Church in 2012, following a centuries-long canonization process.

Hildegard's music is remarkable for its creativity and expressivity. Her best-known work is a musical drama called *Ordo Virtutum* (Order of the Virtues), which portrays the struggles of a human soul to resist mortal temptation. The play's single male role—the devil, who speaks instead of singing to indicate his nature—was probably played by Volmar. Hildegard also composed a wide variety of chants for use in church services. These are notable for their melodic complexity, extensive vocal ranges, frequent variations, and **text painting** (the practice—unusual for the time—of expressing the meaning of the text in music). In short, Hildegard broke all of the rules for chant composition, and as a result created unusually compelling works.

### "O Strength of Wisdom"

We will examine her **antiphon** "O Strength of Wisdom" (Latin: "O Virtus Sapientiae").<sup>1</sup> An antiphon is a short chant that can be used in various ways

throughout the course of the Canonical Hours. Antiphon texts were usually drawn from the Psalms, but Hildegard always wrote her own chant texts. The imagery is inspired by her visions and makes reference to her theological writings:

O strength of Wisdom  
 who, circling, circled,  
 enclosing all  
 in one lifegiving path,  
 three wings you have:  
 one soars to the heights,  
 one distils its essence upon the earth,  
 and the third is everywhere.  
 Praise to you, as is fitting,  
 O Wisdom.

*Translation by Kate Quartano Brown.*

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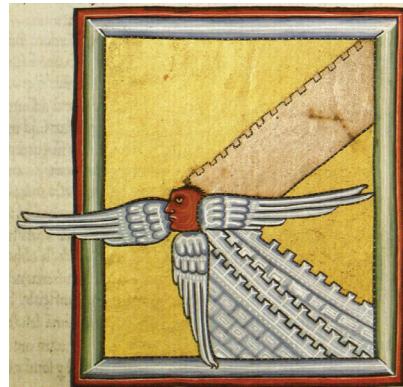
“O Strength of Wisdom”

Composer: Hildegard of Bingen

Performance: Rebecca Ramsey, Armonico Consort, Choir  
 of Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge (2019)

Divine Wisdom (Latin: *Sapientia*), embodied by a woman, was a prominent allegorical character in Hildegard's writings. For her, *Sapientia* was the life-giving force that animated the cosmos. The three-winged figure might refer to an illustration that appeared in *Scivias*, which in turn represented the “Jealousy of God” as he battled the devil. The number three is always associated with the Holy Trinity of God the Father (who “soars to the heights”), God the Son (who is found “upon the earth”), and God the Holy Spirit (who “is everywhere”)—the three natures of the single creator.

This chant is in the Phrygian mode, which is similar to minor but also contains a lowered second scale degree. This can give music in the Phrygian mode a dark and ominous character, but Hildegard's chant is essentially joyful in terms of text and music. It begins with a long **melisma** on the invocation “O.” (A melisma is a sequence of notes sung on a single syllable.) This sets a reverential mood. She uses melismas throughout to emphasize important words—the first



**Image 11.8: This illumination appeared in *Scivias*, Hildegard's first theological work.**

Source: WikiArt

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mention of “Sapientiae,” for example, contains sixteen pitches. Melismas also draw out the text so that the listener has an opportunity to meditate on its meaning: Without them, the poem would be sung too quickly. Hildegard employs text painting when she elevates her melody to its highest note with the words “to the heights,” and then down nearly to its lowest to illustrate the passage “upon the earth.”

## GIOVANNI DA PALESTRINA, *POPE MARCELLUS MASS*

Next we will consider a famous piece of choral music composed in the late 16th century for use in the Sistine Chapel, which is located within the Vatican in Rome and used by the Pope himself. This piece of music is not only beautiful but historically significant. To understand how it came to be composed and why it has the characteristics that it does, we must take a look at the religious politics of the era.

### The Reformation

Beginning in 800, with the foundation of what would later be known as the Holy Roman Empire, the Catholic Church was the dominant religious force in Europe. During the 16th century, however, the Catholic Church began to run into trouble. One by one, factions began to break off, forming new denominations and rejecting the authority of the Pope.



**Image 11.9: This portrait of Martin Luther was painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1529.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons  
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The first sign of defection came in 1517, when Martin Luther, a Catholic priest, posted his 95 theses to the door of a church in Wittenburg, Germany (or so the story goes—it is likely that his writings were in fact disseminated in a less flamboyant manner). Luther's 95 theses were a list of complaints about the Catholic Church. Some of his objections were to practices that amounted to outright corruption. The most famous of these was the sale of indulgences, whereby priests would forgive the sins of their parishioners in return for money. Luther also objected to the complexity of the Catholic hierarchy, which he saw as preventing Christians from experiencing a direct relationship with God. Finally, he had concerns about the services, which were in Latin (a language that was not understood by

most members of the public), and the music, which he worried was overly complex and exclusive.

Luther had no intention of founding a new church. His only desire was to convince the Catholic Church to reform itself. However, he unwittingly began

a chain of events that led to the creation of the Lutheran Church—the music of which we will explore in the next section. The English soon followed the Germans in abandoning Catholicism. The Anglican Church was founded in 1534 by King Henry VIII when the Pope refused to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. And in Switzerland, the Calvinists were defecting from the Catholic Church during this same period.

All of this constituted a crisis for the Catholic Church, which saw the first major challenge to its authority in Europe. To address the crisis, the Pope convened an ecumenical council of high-ranking church officials to reform Catholic doctrine. The Council of Trent was held between 1545 and 1563. It debated a number of issues, and in fact adopted some of the reforms first suggested by Luther.

In 1562, the Council turned its attention to music. It determined that music for worship had come to inappropriately resemble that intended for entertainment. To correct this, the Council banned the use of musical instruments, which were associated with dancing and secular song and were therefore considered inappropriate for worship. Instruments, however, were not the only concern. Church composers had developed the habit of including popular tunes in their music, usually to demonstrate how clever they were at reworking preexisting musical material into something new. Their compositions were also becoming virtuosic and extravagant, and the Council was concerned that the focus of church music was on fancy singing, not the meaning of the text.

The Council was particularly critical of **polyphonic** music, in which each vocal part has an independent melody. In such compositions, the sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses each sing the words of the text at different times, which can make those words almost impossible to understand. Such music is beautiful, but it was perceived to be undermining the goals of the church service.

The Council of Trent briefly considered banning polyphonic music altogether, but ultimately did not, instead issuing strict rules about how such music must be composed. They required that music for the church be sober and restrained, avoiding the showy excesses that were characteristic of music for entertainment, and that the text always be comprehensible. They encouraged styles that were **syllabic**, meaning that each pitch corresponds to a single syllable of text, and **homorhythmic**, meaning that all of the voices move in rhythm together, each singing the same text at the same time.

Luckily for the Catholic Church, a composer was ready to take on the challenge of creating compelling music that met their



**Image 11.10:** This 1588 painting by Pasquale Cati depicts the Council of Trent.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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requirements. Giovanni da Palestrina (1525–1594) spent his entire life in the employment of the Catholic Church. He served as organist, singer, and choir director at a variety of churches in Rome, including St. Peter's basilica, the largest church in the world. It is worth noting that women were prohibited from singing in the choir at St. Peter's. Instead, the high vocal parts were performed by boys, by men who sang in a high **falsetto** range, or by men known as **castrati** due to the fact that they had been castrated before puberty with the result that they retained voices in the soprano range. In total, Palestrina served ten Popes—a testament to the longevity and impact of his career.

### Palestrina and his Music

Palestrina was an advocate of a musical style known as the *ars perfecta*, or “perfect art.” Members of this school of composition believed, first and foremost, that music—like human beings—could be perfected. They sought to develop and formalize a style that was rational and aesthetically pleasing. Palestrina, after all, lived and worked at the height of the Italian **Renaissance**, a period during which the sciences and arts both flourished as intellectuals revived the values of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. Adherents to the *ars perfecta* developed a set of rules for composers to follow. The resulting music was calm, free of dissonance, and fairly predictable. It radiated a sense of self-control and rationality. It also all sounded pretty much the same. Perfection, after all, cannot be improved upon.

Palestrina’s enormous body of music is considered to exemplify the peak of achievement in the *ars perfecta* style. His compositions were particularly influential due to the invention in 1501 of a technique for printing music. Rome was home to one of the first music publication firms, meaning that Palestrina’s compositions could easily be published and distributed across Europe. Palestrina was enormously productive. He wrote over four hundred motets—stand-alone choral pieces with Latin texts that are



**Image 11.12:** This lithograph of Palestrina was produced by Henri-Joseph Hesse in 1828.

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**Image 11.11:** In this engraving we see Giovanni da Palestrina presenting his work to Pope Julius III.

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intended for use during church services. He also created at least 104 settings of the Mass Ordinary, the most famous of which we will examine here.

The **Mass Ordinary** contains all of the words that are spoken or sung at every Catholic Mass, which today we can think of as the typical Sunday morning service. The entire text of the service, including the parts that change from day to day, is termed the **liturgy**. The Mass Ordinary, like the rest of the service, is principally in Latin, and it contains five parts: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. Each part contains a text that is considered central to the Catholic faith, and which parishioners must speak, sing, or at least hear every time they attend a service.

### **Pope Marcellus Mass**

We will examine the Kyrie and Credo from Palestrina's *Pope Marcellus Mass*. Out of Palestrina's many Masses, this one is the most closely associated with the Council of Trent and its musical reforms. Indeed, it is fabled that the Council decided not to ban polyphony after hearing this Mass, although most historians doubt the truth of this story. However, this Mass was certainly composed with the musical values of the Reformation in mind, and it satisfied the Council's requirements.

It is not certain when Palestrina composed this Mass, but it is named for Pope Marcellus II, who reigned for only twenty-two days in 1555. Marcellus's brief papacy happened to span Holy Week, the most sacred period in the Catholic calendar. Holy Week encompasses the seven days leading up to Easter. The most austere of these is Good Friday, on which day the faithful remember Jesus's crucifixion. Following the 1555 Good Friday service in the Sistine Chapel, Pope Marcellus berated the choir for singing music that he found inappropriate given the seriousness of the occasion. Apparently they had chosen music that was complex and virtuosic, while the Pope would have preferred something simple and modest.

This Mass, therefore, was a direct response to the Pope's complaint, but also a more general response to concerns that were later expressed by the Council of Trent. By the time it was published in 1567, it was a model for Catholic composers everywhere. With the *Pope Marcellus Mass*, Palestrina satisfied the new requirements of the Catholic Church without abandoning his musical values. His



**Image 11.13:** This 1555 engraving captured Pope Marcellus II during his brief reign.

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Mass was beautiful and expressive, but also modest and clear. He has succeeded in producing art that served the requirements of worship.

To see how this music worked, we will consider the Kyrie and the Credo. These are the most disparate movements of the Mass. The Kyrie has the shortest text: It translates in its entirety to “Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.” The text is also unusual because it is in Greek, not Latin. The Credo has the longest text, for it details all of the core Catholic beliefs. This text is also known as the Nicene Creed, for it was adopted by the First Council of Nicea in 325. In the context of a musical setting, however, this movement is always termed the Credo. The Latin verb “credo,” which opens the text, means “I believe.” The Credo goes on to summarize the story of Christ and state the essential tenets of the faith. The current English version of the Nicene Creed as used by the Catholic Church reads as follows:

I believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the Only Begotten Son of God,  
born of the Father before all ages.  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us men and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,  
and became man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,  
he suffered death and was buried,  
and rose again on the third day  
in accordance with the Scriptures.  
He ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead  
and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.  
 I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins  
 and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead  
 and the life of the world to come. Amen.

## Kyrie

Time	Form	What to listen for
0'00"	"Lord have mercy"	Each of the six parts enters independently; it is impossible to say which has the melody
1'17"	"Christ have mercy"	This section begins with the soprano and bass in homorhythm, but soon becomes polyphonic
2'37"	"Lord have mercy"	This section has the same texture as the first "Lord have mercy," but the musical contents are different

For his setting of the Kyrie, Palestrina did not take particular concern with the clarity of the text. The reason is evident enough: The text is very brief, and it is instantly recognizable by its first word, which appears nowhere else in the liturgy. In keeping with the three-part structure of the text, Palestrina uses a ternary musical structure. He repeats the short text many times within each section, such that the listener hears the Greek words dozens of times.

The nature of the text allows Palestrina to do two things with his music that were otherwise frowned upon by church authorities. First, his Kyrie is highly **imitative**, each vocal part entering independently. There are six vocal parts, meaning that the texture quickly becomes dense. First, we hear the altos. Next, the highest sopranos, followed by the lowest basses. Within half a minute, everyone is singing. No single part has the melody. Instead, as is typical of polyphonic music, every part is equally important, and melodic fragments are passed around. This also means that the text does not line up between vocal parts. Second, his vocal lines are melismatic, meaning that many notes are sung on a single syllable of text.

All the same, Palestrina is careful not to show off. The music is noble and stately. The melodies are modest and restrained, while the harmonies move slowly and deliberately. The movement has a single, introspective mood. Palestrina aims to

create an atmosphere in which churchgoers can ponder the meaning of the words and prepare for worship.

### Credo

Time	Text	What to listen for
0'00"	"I believe in one God. . ."	The opening line is chanted by a solo male voice
0'07"	" . . . the Father almighty. . ."	We seldom hear all six voice parts at the same time; instead, groups of three to five voice parts take turns singing phrases in homorhythm
2'31"	" . . . and by the Holy Spirit. . ."	The note values lengthen and the rhythmic complexity lessens
3'27"	"For our sake he was crucified. . . ."	The texture is reduced to four voices; at first, we hear only the low parts
5'11"	"I believe in the Holy Spirit. . ."	The texture expands to six voices; this passage is sprinkled with melismas
7'53"	"Amen"	The texture becomes increasingly polyphonic

The Credo is quite different. To begin with, although the Credo text is about thirty times as long as the Kyrie text, the Credo movement is only about twice as long as the Kyrie. This is because Palestrina does not repeat text and does not draw out words using melismas. Instead, he focuses on moving through the text from beginning to end with the maximum of clarity.

Palestrina achieves this clarity in several ways. First, he seldom uses the entire choir, instead limiting the texture to three or four vocal parts. Second, he uses a homophonic texture in which all of the parts sing the same words at the same time. Finally, he avoids melismas, using them only at the ends of phrases once the meaning has already been communicated.

The Credo contains more musical diversity than the Kyrie. Palestrina divides it into four sections. The first includes the opening text, the second begins with Christ's incarnation, and the third describes his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The final section lists the core Catholic beliefs. Because the third section contains the text most essential to Christianity, it receives the most serious treatment. Palestrina reduces his choir to four parts and uses long note values for the passage about Christ's burial, followed by more rapid rhythms to symbolize his return to life.

Palestrina's *Pope Marcellus Mass* provides an excellent example of how the values of the Christian church influenced the development of music. Palestrina's Latin-texted compositions are frequently performed by choirs today, and they are widely admired for their elegance and beauty. However, Palestrina might never have produced music in quite this style were it not for pressure from his employers.

## JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH, FUGUE IN G MINOR AND SLEEPERS, WAKE

About 150 years later, another composer of church music was also guided by the needs and preferences of his faith community. The church music of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) is quite different from that of Palestrina, however, both because musical tastes had changed in the intervening years and because Bach worked not for the Catholic but for the Lutheran Church. We will take a look at two of his most famous creations: a piece of music for the organ and a composition for choir and orchestra.

### Bach's Legacy

Today, the music of J.S. Bach is performed more frequently than that of almost any other composer from the European tradition. Ensembles all over the world are dedicated to his music, while countless books have detailed his life and works. He is esteemed by many as the greatest composer of all time (although, as will be discussed in the final chapter of this book, it is nearly impossible to define “greatness” in music).

All of this would have very much surprised the composer himself. During his lifetime, Bach was not particularly famous or respected, and he struggled constantly with difficult working conditions and low pay. He was better known as an organist than as a composer: While Bach was respected as a virtuoso



**Image 11.14:** This portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach was painted in 1746 by Elias Gottlob Haussmann.

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**Image 11.15: During his lifetime, Bach was best known as an organist. He is depicted at the console in this 1725 engraving.**

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performer, his compositions were considered old-fashioned and stuffy. Only a handful of his works—mostly for keyboard—were published before his death, and he had no reason to expect future generations to take any interest in his music.

Bach's fortunes shifted in the early 19th century, when German musicians began to revive and popularize his music. The most significant such event took place in 1829 when the composer Felix Mendelssohn staged a performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Berlin. Like *Sleepers, Wake* (German: *Wachet auf*), which we will examine, the *St. Matthew Passion* was a work for choir and orchestra intended for use in a Lutheran church service. Bach never imagined that any of his church music would be performed in concert halls or consumed as either art or entertainment. He sought only to support the work of the church. Since the time of Mendelssohn, however,

Bach's choral compositions have been a staple of the concert repertoire, and today's listener can access thousands of recordings.

A brief examination of Bach's life and career will serve to contextualize his work as a composer. Bach was born into a large family of German musicians that extended back for many generations. His father, grandfather, great-grandfather, uncles, and other male ancestors were all performers and in most cases composers, while his sons were all to become composers as well. From the time of his birth, therefore, there was no doubt about Bach's future career. Musicians of his time and place generally found employment with either a court or a city, in which capacity they would produce new compositions, oversee performances, and participate in those performances as instrumentalists or singers.

## Bach's Career

Bach never lived outside the region of Thuringia, which today is located in central Germany, and he never travelled beyond the borders of the modern German nation. Following an education in Eisenach, he took a series of five professional posts. First he served as a church organist in the cities of Arnstadt (1703-1707) and Mühlhausen (1707-1708). His next position was at the ducal court in Weimar (1708-1717), where he played the organ and served as music director. After this he became music director at the court of Prince Leopold in Köthen (1717-1723). Finally, Bach took the position of music director at the St. Thomas Church in the city of Leipzig, where he remained until his death.

Famously, Bach was not the city council's first choice for the job. They initially offered the post to a composer—Georg Philipp Telemann—whose music is only seldom performed today, but who at the time was considered to be more fashionable. Bach was in turn loathe to accept the job, which was less prestigious than the post he held in Köthen. He made the move to Leipzig, however, out of concern for his family. Bach, who was married twice, had a total of twenty children, ten of whom survived into adulthood. Leipzig had excellent schools, and he knew that his sons would have better prospects in that city. Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, was herself a highly-skilled musician. She provided her husband with invaluable assistance, copying out parts by hand each week so that the church musicians could perform his music during the Sunday service.

In Leipzig, Bach was required to perform a variety of tasks on behalf of the municipal government. He was principally responsible for music at the St. Thomas Church, but also oversaw music at the city's other three churches. As music director, Bach produced instrumental and vocal compositions for use in the church, hired musicians, ran rehearsals, and played the organ. He also taught music and Latin at the St. Thomas School, which was attached to the church. Finally, he was obliged to produce music for civic occasions, including commemorations of important events and celebrations of esteemed visitors.

Bach frequently complained about his immense workload and limited resources. He felt that the city did not provide adequate funds with which to hire



**Image 11.16:** Today, this statue of Bach stands outside of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig.

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**Image 11.17:** The interior of the St. Thomas Church looks much the same today as it did in Bach's time.

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**Image 11.18:** This 1723 engraving depicts the St. Thomas Church and adjoining School, where Bach taught music and Latin.

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the musicians that he needed, and he often had to limit his instrumentation due to budgetary concerns. Although today one can hear Bach's music rendered by the best choirs and orchestras in the world, Bach himself was seldom able to arrange for high-quality performances of his music. He relied primarily on students from the St. Thomas School and from the nearby Leipzig University.

We will examine two pieces of church music from two different parts of his career. Bach's Fugue in G minor dates from his early years as a church organist in Arnstadt. Like most of Bach's music, it has survived only as a handwritten manuscript. The same is true of *Sleepers, Wake*, which was created in 1731 for use at the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig.

### Fugue in G minor

		Fugue in G minor Composer: Johann Sebastian Bach Performance: Wolfgang Rübsam (1977)
Time	Form	What to listen for
0'00"	Exposition	The subject is heard first in the soprano voice, then alto, then tenor, then bass
0'51"	Episode	All of the episodes consist largely of sequences
0'58"	Subject	After a false entrance in the tenor, the subject is heard in the soprano
1'11"	Episode	
1'17"	Subject	Heard in the alto
1'28"	Episode	
1'36"	Subject	Heard in the bass
1'47"	Episode	
1'59"	Subject	Heard in the soprano
2'10"	Episode	This is the most diverse and lengthy episode
2'31"	Subject	Heard in the bass; the tempo slows before the final cadence

Bach wrote hundreds of fugues, most of which had nothing to do with his work as a church musician. The term **fugue** refers to a compositional technique that can be applied across genres. Bach wrote most of his fugues for keyboard instruments such as the harpsichord, which resembles a small piano in appearance but creates sound using quite a different process: When the player depresses a key, it causes a string to be plucked with a quill or piece of hard leather. Most famously, Bach twice wrote keyboard fugues in every major and minor key. His two collections, known as *The Well-Tempered Clavier Book I* (1722) and *Book II* (1742), were intended to demonstrate a new method for tuning the harpsichord. Bach also wrote fugues for solo string instruments, orchestra, and choir. One of Bach's final works, entitled *The Art of Fugue*, was left incomplete at his death but nonetheless demonstrated his ultimate mastery of the technique.

Fugal technique was widely employed in the 18th century. It is simple in principle, but very challenging to execute. Whether a fugue is written for instrumentalists or singers, we always speak of its “voices” and use the typical choral designations: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Most fugues have four voices, although Bach wrote for as few as two and as many as six.

Every fugue begins with a solo melody in one of the voices. This melody is called the **subject**. The composer will introduce the subject in each of the voices in turn until all have entered the texture. This section of the fugue is called the **exposition**. For the remainder of the fugue, sections that do not contain the subject, which are known as **episodes**, will alternate with statements of the subject, which constitute the **development**. The subject will appear in many different keys and sometimes in different forms (for example, the melody might be turned upside down) until finally it is heard one last time in the original key and the fugue concludes. A fugue might have many episodes or none at all, and there is no predetermined length or precise form.

Fugue				
<u>Exposition</u>	<u>Development</u>	<u>Final</u>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject introduced</li> <li>• Subject answered (in different keys)</li> <li>• Countersubjects accompany subjects</li> </ul>	<p><b>Episode(s)</b> Bridging material for return to Subjects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject presented in different keys</li> <li>• Possible transformations of the subject (inversions, etc.)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Episode(s)</b> Bridging material for return to Subjects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject and countersubject in the original key</li> </ul>		
Optional: <b>Coda</b> (at the end)				

Fugues are difficult to write because the composer must follow complex rules concerning the relationships between the voices. These rules concern the distances between simultaneous pitches, the directions in which voices move, the special treatment of notes that do not belong to chords, and the keys in which the subject must appear. Because the subject itself can never be altered, the composer must employ all of their skill to avoid breaking rules. (These rules are not arbitrary, but rather emerged over decades of practice and guide the composer in creating a fugue that sounds good.) Bach seems to have enjoyed the challenge of fugue writing, and he often created subjects that were especially difficult to work with.

Although a fugue is not necessarily an example of church music, Bach composed organ fugues for use in Lutheran church services. We will examine a fairly simple fugue that he composed in his capacity as church organist for the city of Arnstadt. He would have played his Fugue in G minor at the beginning or end of services, but also on organ recitals that were intended not for worship but for the enjoyment of the audience. While this piece of music sets a mood that is appropriately serious for worship, its complexities also reward careful listening.

In Arnstadt, Bach played on an organ that had just been installed by the builder Johann Friederich Wender. All organs work by blowing air through pipes, which might be made out of wood or metal, be of various shapes, or contain reeds. These

variations allow organs to produce many different sounds. Most organs have multiple keyboards, each of which can be linked to one or more sets of pipes. In this way, the performer can quickly change from one sound quality to another by moving between keyboards. Sets of pipes are activated or deactivated by adjusting wooden rods known as stops. Organs also have an additional keyboard, termed the pedalboard, that is operated using the feet. The pedalboard is typically linked to pipes that sound in the lowest register.

Despite its complexity, the organ is actually one of the oldest instruments found in Europe. Organs were first developed in



**Image 11.19: Although the church in Arnstadt was known as the New Church during the time that Bach worked there, in 1935 it was renamed the Bach Church in honor of the composer.**

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**Image 11.20: The organ in the New Church at Arnstadt.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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ancient Greece over two thousand years ago. Although early organs were small and portable instruments, they began to grow in the 14th century when the first permanent organ was installed in a church. By the 19th century organs had become enormous instruments capable of producing a great range of volumes and timbres.

Bach's organ in Arnstadt is still played today. Like other Baroque organs, it is fairly small, although still capable of producing a wide variety of sounds. It has two keyboards and a pedalboard, which together give the player access to twenty-one sets of pipes. Baroque organs are not capable of gradual changes in dynamic. The performer can suddenly alternate between loud and soft by changing keyboards, but all notes played using a given set of pipes are the same volume. Fugues, therefore, are most often performed without any dynamic changes.

Bach's Fugue in G minor (often called the "Little" Fugue in G minor, to distinguish it from others in the same key) has a five-measure subject. The subject begins with long note values, but gradually incorporates shorter and shorter note values as it proceeds. This creates an impression of increased activity, even though the tempo does not accelerate. The fugue has four voices, which enter from highest to lowest in the order soprano-alto-tenor-bass. The texture quickly becomes dense, and—after the opening measures—at least one voice is moving rapidly at all times. Although the fugue is short, therefore, one needs to listen to it several time to hear everything that is going on. It can be challenging to pick out the subject, even once it has become familiar.

Bach was noted for the density and complexity of his music. Indeed, that was the characteristic that earned him scorn in his own time—just as it earned him respect a century after his death. He also preferred to establish and then maintain a single mood with each piece of music. As such, there is little expressive variation within the Fugue in G minor. Once the engine starts, it runs steadily and unerringly until the final cadence.

### **Sleepers, Wake**

During the early years of his employment in Leipzig, J.S. Bach dedicated most of his energy to the creation of **Lutheran church cantatas**. This was a big job because the churches there required a new cantata every week. The Lutheran liturgical calendar is organized into a year-long cycle of Biblical readings, and the cantata corresponded with the topic of the readings and the sermon. For this reason, Bach needed to produce an appropriate cantata for every Sunday morning Mass and for special services, making for a total of sixty cantatas a year.

After his first year on the job, Bach could have begun to reuse old cantatas—but instead he completed a whole second cycle and most of three additional cycles. Bach had also written church cantatas at several of his previous jobs. However, none of his church cantatas were ever published. As a result, about two hundred are extant today, while hundreds more might have been lost.

A **cantata** is a multi-part work for voice(s) and instrumental accompaniment. Bach's Lutheran church cantatas are multi-movement works for choir, soloists, and

orchestra. Bach always used texts in German, the language of his congregation. He did not write the texts himself, however, but rather selected them from among the works of various theological poets. Each cantata is thirty to forty minutes long and usually contains four to seven movements. Some of the movements use the entire choir, while others feature solo singers, often paired with solo instruments.

Bach's cantatas constituted the musical focus for worship at St. Thomas and other churches in Leipzig. Although forty minutes of choral music might seem excessive, the services themselves lasted four hours. The centerpiece was a one-hour sermon, which was preceded by opening prayers, hymns, readings, and the performance of the cantata. Communion followed the sermon.

The cantata had a very specific purpose: It reflected on the Biblical readings for the day, interpreted their meaning for the congregation, and prepared listeners to understand and appreciate the sermon. As stated above, Bach in no way regarded his cantatas as entertainment—or even, strictly speaking, art. He was deeply committed to his Lutheran faith and he understood his role in the service to be essentially spiritual. His cantatas shaped churchgoers' understanding of their relationship with God.

We will see Bach's approach to cantata composition in *Sleepers, Wake*. Although many of Bach's cantatas are difficult to date, we know that this one was first performed on November 25, 1731. The occasion was the 27th Sunday after Trinity—a day that occurs only in years during which Easter falls very early, for in regular years the liturgical season of Advent will have already commenced. This explains why Bach had to write this cantata several years after having completed his annual cycles, for the 27th Sunday after Trinity had not occurred since 1704. *Sleepers, Wake* was performed only once in Bach's lifetime, at Leipzig's St. Nicholas Church.

The Epistle reading for the 27th Sunday after Trinity is 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11, while the Gospel reading is Matthew 25: 1-13. Both exhort Christians to be prepared for the return of Christ. In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, he warns that the Lord will come "like a thief in the night," without any warning. Matthew records the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. All had gathered together to await the coming of the bridegroom (an allegory for Christ), but the foolish virgins had failed to bring extra oil for their lamps. While they were away buying oil, the bridegroom arrived and the wedding feast commenced. The wise virgins, who were prepared for the arrival, were welcomed into the hall, but the foolish virgins were shut

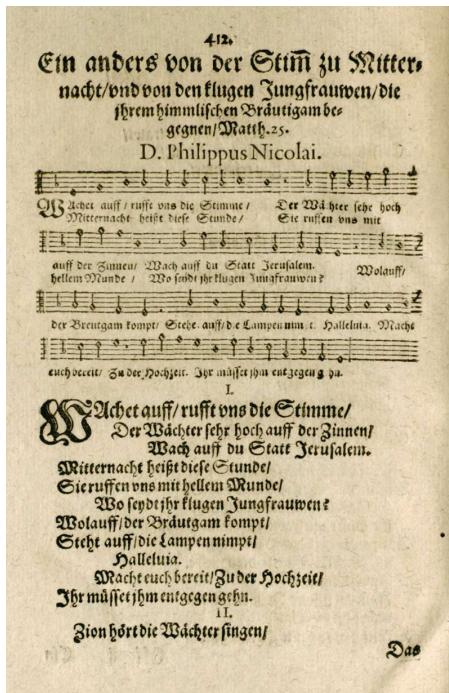


**Image 11.21: Bach was also responsible for music at the large St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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**Image 11.22:** Here we see the original 1599 publication of the chorale "Sleepers, Wake."

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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out in the darkness. The message is clear: Christians must be prepared for Christ's coming. If they are not, they will be excluded from heaven and denied eternal life.

Bach's cantata reflects on this parable using a variety of musical and dramatic techniques. He began by selecting an appropriate **Lutheran chorale** on which to base his cantata. Chorales are unison hymns sung by the congregation, and they were first developed by Martin Luther himself in the early years of the church. One of Luther's objections to Catholic worship was that the music was performed in Latin by professional choirs. He preferred participatory music in the language of the congregants. To develop a repertoire of chorales, he wrote new tunes, adapted Gregorian chants, and even borrowed popular melodies. Luther saw no problem with using secular music for worship. As he supposedly put it, "Why should the devil have all the good tunes?"

Because *Sleepers, Wake* is based on a Lutheran chorale, it is a special type of cantata known as a **chorale cantata**. Bach primarily wrote chorale cantatas while in Leipzig, and he developed a unique approach to their construction, of which *Sleepers, Wake* is a fine example. The cantata contains seven movements, three of which—the first, fourth, and seventh—include text and music from a 1599 chorale of the same name. Bach selected this chorale because it, too, comments on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, thereby offering another layer of interpretation. Everyone in the congregation at St. Thomas would have known the chorale well and would have instantly recognized the words and music. Because the chorale is in A A B form, each of the movements based on it is in that same form.

## I. Wake up, the voice calls us

Bach spreads his references to the chorale throughout the cantata, and he integrates it with his own music differently on each occasion. In the first movement, we hear the choir sing the first verse of the chorale text:

Wake up, the voice calls us  
of the watchmen high up on the battlements,  
wake up, you city of Jerusalem!  
This hour is called midnight;

they call us with a clear voice:  
 where are you, wise virgins?  
 Get up, the bridegroom comes;  
 Stand up, take your lamps! Hallelujah!  
 Alleluia!  
 Make yourselves ready  
 for the wedding,  
 you must go to meet him!

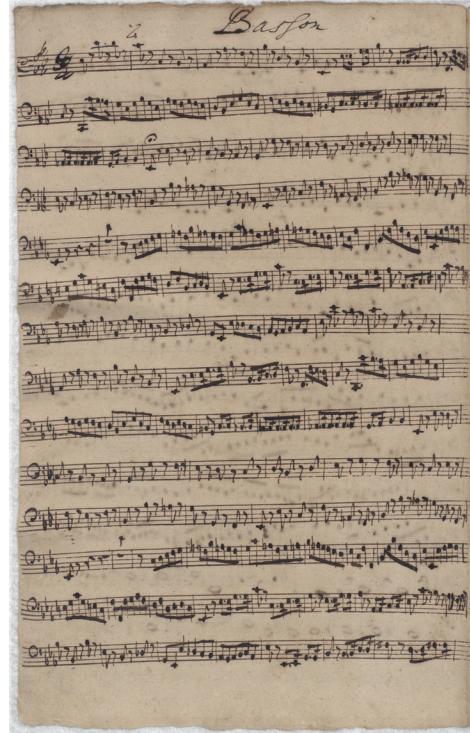
*Translation by Francis Browne*

We also hear the chorale melody, but it is buried in a dense texture of newly-composed music. While Bach's congregation would have recognized the chorale, many modern listeners have a hard time even picking the melody out.

		I. "Wake up, the voice calls us" from <i>Sleepers, Wake</i> Composer: Johann Sebastian Bach Performance: American Bach Soloists (2007)
Time	Form	What to listen for
0'00"	Ritornello	The violins and oboes exchange melodic material in a call-and-response texture
0'28"	A "Wake up, the voice calls us . . ."	The sopranos sing the chorale melody while the altos, tenors, and basses sing newly-composed material
1'32"	Ritornello	This ritornello is identical to that which opened the movement
2'00"	A "This hour is called midnight . . ."	The A music repeats with a new texts
3'04"	Ritornello	This ritornello sounds different because it moves through several key areas

	B	
3'24"	"Get up, the bridegroom comes. . ."	We hear exclamations of "get up" and "stand up" from the choir
3'57"	"Alleluia!"	This passage is especially ornate; the chorale melody does not enter until near the end
4'42"	"Make yourselves ready. . ."	The texture returns to normal
5'32"	Ritornello	We hear the complete ritornello one last time
2'10"	Episode	This is the most diverse and lengthy episode
2'31"	Subject	Heard in the bass; the tempo slows before the final cadence

The first movement starts with orchestral music, the uneven dotted rhythms of which suggest a wedding march. Dotted rhythms were also associated with royalty in this era—another appropriate connotation for music about Christ's coming. This opening passage is in fact a **ritornello**. In this movement Bach combines ritornello form, in which an orchestral melody returns throughout a piece of music, with the A A B form of the chorale. The resulting form is: rit A rit A rit B rit. The orchestra also provides short interjections between the verses within each section. Although a congregation might sing the first verse of the chorale in less than two minutes, the first movement of the cantata takes nearly four times as long to perform. This is due to the slowed-down chorale melody and frequent orchestral interruptions. As a result, however, the congregation has an opportunity to meditate on the text, the meaning of which is reinforced by Bach's musical setting.



**Image 11.23:** This bassoon part in Bach's own hand is one of only a few extant original manuscripts for *Sleepers, Wake.*

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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The first movement is texturally very dense. There are active parts for strings, winds, and voices, and it is seldom possible to identify a single, dominant melody. The opening ritornello contains three distinct layers. Underpinning everything is the **basso continuo**, a feature of almost all music composed in the Baroque era (1600-1750). Basso continuo is always performed by some combination of low-pitched instruments and instruments that can play chords. In this case, we hear cello, bassoon, organ, and harpsichord. While Baroque bass lines can be simple, Bach's seldom are. This one contains a variety of interesting rhythmic and melodic elements, thereby attracting an unusual amount of the listener's attention. Above that, the violins and oboe trade melodic motifs back and forth in a six-part texture.

When the singers enter, the orchestra begins by repeating the musical material from the ritornello. The already-dense texture suddenly becomes much more complex. First we hear the sopranos with the familiar chorale melody. While the sopranos sing in slow, even note values, the altos, tenors, and basses sing quickly. These other voices occasionally integrate text painting as well, such as with their ascending cries on the text "wake up". Also notable is the passage on the text "Alleluia," which features excitable melismas in the altos, tenors, and basses.

Ritornello Form: Movements I & IV of Bach's <i>Sleepers, Wake</i>						
	A <i>from chorale</i>		A <i>from chorale</i>		B <i>from chorale</i>	
<u>ritornello</u> orchestra	lines 1-3 of text with accompaniment	<u>ritornello</u> orchestra	lines 4-6 of text with accompaniment	<u>ritornello</u> orchestra	lines 7-12 of text with accompaniment	<u>ritornello</u> orchestra

#### IV. Zion hears the watchmen sing

The chorale disappears until the fourth movement,<sup>2</sup> when we hear the second verse sung by the tenor section:

Zion hears the watchmen sing,  
her heart leaps for joy,  
she awakes and gets up in haste.  
Her friend comes from heaven in his splendour,  
strong in mercy, mighty in truth.  
Her light becomes bright, her star rises.

Now come, you worthy crown,  
Lord Jesus, God's son!  
Hosanna!  
We all follow  
to the hall of joy  
and share in the Lord's supper.

*Translation by Francis Browne.*

2.



IV. "Zion hears the watchmen sing" from *Sleepers, Wake*

Composer: Johann Sebastian Bach

Performance: American Bach Soloists (2007)

This movement is much simpler than the first movement. In place of the orchestral ritornello, with its call-and-response texture, we have a unison ritornello melody from the violins and violas. The chorale melody, instead of being buried in a complex texture, is clearly presented without competition from other vocal parts. All the same, this movement is by no means simple. The two melodies—one in the strings, one in the tenors—weave around one another in unpredictable and extraordinary ways. While their phrases never start or end together, the parts always complement one another.

## VII. May gloria be sung to you

We finally hear a straightforward presentation of the chorale in the seventh movement,<sup>3</sup> in which the entire choir—and perhaps the congregation as well—sing the third verse in four-part harmony:

May gloria be sung to you  
with the tongues of men and angels,  
with harps and with cymbals.  
The gates are made of twelve pearls,  
in your city we are companions  
of the angels on high around your throne.  
No eye has ever perceived,  
no ear has ever heard  
such joy.  
Therefore we are joyful,  
hurray, hurray!  
for ever in sweet rejoicing.

*Translation by Francis Browne*

3.



VII. "May gloria be sung to you" from *Sleepers, Wake*  
 Composer: Johann Sebastian Bach  
 Performance: American Bach Soloists (2007)

Although Bach borrowed chorale melodies from the Lutheran tradition, he always created his own harmonizations. In practice, this means that the soprano part is borrowed, but the alto, tenor, and bass parts are original. Bach has the orchestral musicians double the vocal parts, playing the same melodies that are being sung. This makes the ensemble sound exceptionally full and rich without distracting from the chorale melody: a fitting culmination to the cantata.

## II. He comes

Although there are four movements that do not contain the chorale melody or text, we will look at only two of them. The text was supplied by an unknown poet. It includes many references to the Song of Solomon—a passage of Biblical love poetry that was understood by Bach and his contemporaries to be a metaphor for the love between Jesus and the faithful soul. To set this expressive new text, Bach used musical forms from the opera stage: **recitative** and **aria**. Bach never wrote an opera and did not think highly of the form, but he often adapted operatic conventions for his own purposes.

The second movement<sup>4</sup> of *Sleepers, Wake* is a recitative for solo tenor:

He comes, he comes,  
 the bridegroom comes!  
 You daughters of Zion, come out,  
 he hastens his departure from on high  
 to your mother's house.  
 The bridegroom comes, who like a roe deer  
 and a young stag  
 leaps on the hills  
 and brings to you the wedding feast.  
 Wake up, rouse yourselves  
 to welcome the bridegroom!  
 There, see, he comes this way.

*Translation by Francis Browne.*

4.



II. "He comes" from *Sleepers, Wake*  
 Composer: Johann Sebastian Bach  
 Performance: American Bach Soloists (2007)

He announces the coming of the bridegroom with a series of exuberant melodic leaps, accompanied only by basso continuo. This movement contains no repetition and has no particular form. In fact, the singing—as is always the case with recitative—is not particularly melodic at all. Instead, its purpose is to declaim the text with the utmost expressive force.

### III. When are you coming, my salvation?

Time	Form	What to listen for
0'00"	Ritornello	This ritornello features a virtuosic violin obbligato
0'26"	A “When are you coming...”	The soprano and bass exchange lines while the solo violin line weaves about them
1'46"	Ritornello	This ritornello is similar to that which opened the movement, but it is in a different key
1'59"	B “Open the hall...”	This passage has the same texture as A, but the music and text are different
2'32"	Ritornello	This passage is not closely related to the opening ritornello
2'46"	B'	This passage is similar to B, but it is in a different key
3'18"	Ritornello	This ritornello is very brief, for it is interrupted by the return of the A text
3'25"	A' “When are you coming...”	This passage echoes A, but is not musically identical
4'25"	Ritornello	The closing ritornello is identical to that which opened the movement

The recitative serves to introduce the third movement, which is a duet for soprano and bass. Just as recitative developed within the operatic tradition, this is clearly an operatic duet—specifically, the type of duet sung by two characters who are in love. The soprano and bass call back and forth to one another, expressing their mutual desire. Bach’s lovers, however, are a Soul (soprano) and Jesus (bass), and they offer a dramatic enactment of the desire that all Christians are meant to feel for their savior.

Because the third movement is based in operatic conventions, it has the ***da capo form*** of an opera aria. “Da capo” literally means “from the head,” and it serves as an instruction to the performers to repeat the first of two parts, resulting in an A B A form. (The second A is not written out.) Bach accompanies his aria with basso continuo and an ***obbligato*** (or “obligatory”) instrumental solo. He intended the obbligato part in the fourth movement to be performed on the violino piccolo, a type of small violin that is tuned higher than a modern instrument. However, it can also be performed on a standard violin. The instrumental soloist provides ritornellos before, between, and after each of the sung sections, but also supplies a virtuosic accompaniment to the vocal soloists. The resulting music is beautiful and expressive—even if the text is a bit corny:

Soul: When are you coming, my salvation?

Jesus: I come, your portion.

Soul: I wait with burning oil.

Jesus: Open the hall

Soul: I open the hall

Both: to the heavenly feast.

Soul: Come, Jesus!

Jesus: Come, lovely soul!

*Translation by Francis Browne.*

## JOHN NEWTON, “AMAZING GRACE”

So far, we have examined compositions for use in Christian worship that are fixed in terms of their musical details. Two recordings of *Sleepers, Wake*, for example, might differ slightly in terms of tempo or timbre, but they will sound essentially the same. They will certainly contain all of the same pitches and rhythms, and will be similar in length. These are all characteristics of the classical tradition, in which the composer exercises a great deal of control over the musical work.

Next, however, we will examine an example of Christian worship music that has changed dramatically as it has been adopted and adapted by different religious communities. In fact, the only element of “Amazing Grace” to remain consistent throughout its lifetime has been the words, although all of the versions under consideration here also use the same melody—that will be familiar

to those who know the hymn. This stylistic flexibility is typical of music in the **vernacular** tradition, which permits the reinterpretation and transformation of musical compositions by individual performers.

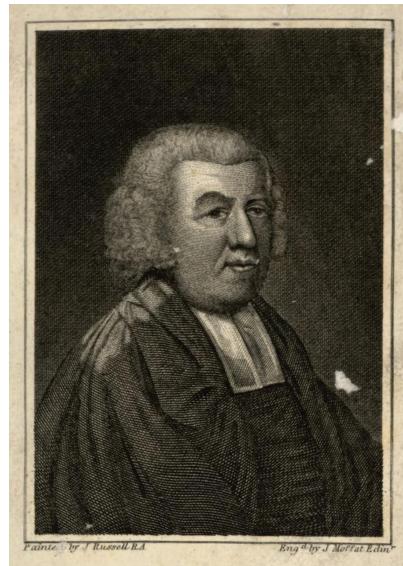
No-one has ever performed *Sleepers, Wake* without being aware that it was composed by J.S. Bach, but people sing “Amazing Grace” every day without knowing who penned the words or music. Indeed, those are not easy questions to answer—the text, although initially written by John Newton (1725–1807), was later expanded by an anonymous author, while people still debate the identity of the tune’s composer. People who know this hymn are more likely to identify it with one of its great interpreters, such as Aretha Franklin, whose version we will encounter below.

## Newton’s Life

The story of “Amazing Grace” begins with John Newton, who wrote six verses—some familiar from modern usage, some not—in 1772. Newton was a clergyman in the Church of England. He served as curate in the village of Olney, where his parishioners were largely impoverished and uneducated. Newton gained a reputation for impassioned preaching that spoke to the personal moral struggles of his congregants. Unlike other preachers, Newton willingly shared sins from his own past—and those were certainly in no short supply.

Newton took to the sea as a ship’s apprentice at the age of eleven, but was pressed into service with the Royal Navy after refusing to obey his captain’s orders. After deserting the Navy to visit a young lady, Polly Catlett, he was traded to a slave ship, where he developed a reputation for writing obscene songs and using language that shocked even sailors. Newton had renounced his Christian faith early in his seagoing career, but in 1748 a near-death experience aboard the ship *Greyhound* inspired him to reconsider his beliefs. He was further encouraged by his love for Polly, whom he married in 1750. All the same, it was many years (and another brush with death) before Newton reformed in any meaningful way, and he continued to work in the slave trade well into the 1750s. Newton began studying theology in 1756 and was finally successful in securing ordination and his position at Olney in 1764.

At Olney, Newton began writing hymns for his congregation to sing together at weekly prayer meetings. Newton’s hymns used simple language that was easily intelligible to his parishioners, and many of his texts were written in the first person. They focused on the confession of sins and the joys of salvation. Although



**Image 11.24: This engraving of John Newton by John Moffat was published around 1788.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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**Image 11.25: Here we see the interior of St. Peter and St. Paul's Church in Olney, where Newton served as curate.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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the quality of his verse was criticized by some, Newton's hymns became quite popular. They first appeared in print as part of the 1779 collection *Olney Hymns*, which included "Amazing Grace":

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)

    That sav'd a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,

    Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,

    And grace my fears reliev'd;

How precious did that grace appear

    The hour I first believ'd!

Thro' many dangers, toils, and snares,

    I have already come;

'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,

    And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promis'd good to me,  
 His word my hope secures;  
 He will my shield and portion be  
 As long as life endures.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,  
 And mortal life shall cease;  
 I shall possess, within the veil,  
 A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,  
 The sun forbear to shine;  
 But God, who call'd me here below,  
 Will be forever mine.

Although it is known that Newton's congregation used his "Amazing Grace" text beginning in 1773, we have no idea what tune or tunes the text was sung to. It certainly was not the tune we know today. Newton was not a composer, but he always intended for his devotional poems to be sung. Like other hymn text authors, he crafted his verses using specific patterns of syllables and rhymes so that they could be sung to preexisting melodies. This system of interchangeable texts and tunes meant that any hymn text could be sung to a variety of tunes and any tune could be supplied with a variety of texts. Only over time have specific texts and tunes in the hymn tradition come to be paired off, such that churchgoers expect a text—"Amazing Grace," for example—always to be sung to the same melody.

### **"Amazing Grace"<sup>5</sup> in the Sacred Harp Tradition**

5.



"Amazing Grace"

Performance: Texas Sacred Harp Singers, Southwest  
 Sacred Harp Singing Convention (2011)

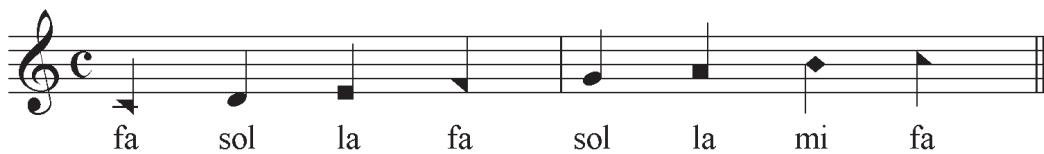
The pairing of "Amazing Grace" with its tune took place in 1835, when William Walker published a version in his hymnal *Southern Harmony*. The name of the tune was "New Britain" and it had already been in circulation for some time, although in the company of different texts. The authorship of "New Britain" is still contested. It was based in turn on two older melodies that first appeared in the 1829 hymnal *Columbian Harmony*. These tunes are unattributed, which indicates that they might be the work of hymnal compilers Charles H. Spilman and Benjamin Shaw. It is equally likely, however, that the tunes derive from folk tradition and might trace their origin to the British Isles. The "New Britain" tune also appears in an 1828 manuscript compiled by hymn composer Lucius Chapin, who has been proposed as yet another potential author. It is unlikely that a composer will ever

be identified—if, indeed, “New Britain” was even the product of a single composer, which we have reason to doubt.

By the time William Walker published his version in 1835, the “Amazing Grace” text had already become very popular in the United States. It was widely used during the Second Great Awakening, which saw the staging of revivals across the country. These revivals featured charismatic preachers, who swayed crowds using emotionally charged speech punctuated with song. The verses of “Amazing Grace”—which embodied the personal, confessional approach to conversion favored by these preachers—were paired with simple refrains and sung to familiar tunes without the aid of hymnals.

Walker was not personally associated with the Second Great Awakening, but he made his living as a hymn publisher and singing teacher, and was therefore aware of trends in the world of Protestant worship music. Walker belonged to the American hymn tradition known as **shape-note singing**, which encompasses a unique form of notation, an approach to music education, and a compositional style.

The notation used in the shape-note tradition was first developed in late-18th century England for the purpose of simplifying the task of reading music. As its name suggests, shaped notation employs various shapes—each paired with a syllable—to represent the different pitches. In its original form, the system used only four shapes, even though a scale contains seven distinct pitches. The shapes were repeated in a way that maintained consistent patterns of intervals between shapes. If a singer could learn the intervallic distance between two shapes, they could easily sing music at sight. The syllables provide an additional tool for singers and also make it easy to teach the system. (The use of syllables to learn melodies actually dates back to ca. 1026, when the Italian monk Guido of Arezzo proposed a system that used six syllables—including the four later adapted by shape-note enthusiasts.)



**Image 11.26: These are the four distinct shapes used in Sacred Harp-style notation.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Shaped notation was adopted in the United States as part of a movement to improve church music. During the second half of the 18th century, music lovers in New England began to lament the sorry state of American congregational singing. Churchgoers were largely illiterate, and they did not have access to hymnals or instruments. The most common method of hymn singing, known as **lining out**, required a songleader to call out a musical phrase, which the congregants would then repeat in unison. Activists wanted to restore four-part harmony to the worship service, but this would require music literacy and access to printed notation.

To fulfill both of these needs, entrepreneurs began to publish hymn books and offer singing schools. A singing master would travel around a region, spending two weeks at a time teaching anyone who was interested how to read using the shape-note system. Singing schools were usually hosted by a church, and classes would meet daily. These schools not only paved the way to better church music, but also provided much-needed entertainment to farming communities during the winter months and facilitated interactions between young men and women, who had few opportunities to encounter one another unchaperoned. The students would not only pay tuition to the singing master but would purchase hymn books—another important source of income.

The hymns composed in the American shape-note tradition were unique. Most of the composers—William Billings (1746-1800) and Daniel Read (1757-1836) were the most famous to emerge from the First New England School—were self-taught, and they gleefully rejected the conventions of European harmony and part writing. Their hymns contain unusual and harsh sounds (the result of breaking voice-leading rules), uneven phrases, and incomplete chordal harmonies (open fifths in place of triads). The shape-note composers also adhered to the ancient practice of putting the melody in the tenor part instead of the soprano—an approach, dating back to medieval church polyphony, that had already disappeared from European choral music.

The singing school movement was launched in New England, but by the early 19th century had come to be regarded as outdated. The North, after all, aspired to a cosmopolitan identity and was embarrassed by the primitive efforts of its shape-note composers. The movement, however, found a new home in the South, where rural singing masters flourished up until the Civil War. It was there that the most influential hymn books were published. William Walker's *Southern Harmony* was among these, but without question the most important shape-note hymnal was *The Sacred Harp* (1844), published in Georgia by Benjamin Franklin White and Elisha J. King. Unlike other such hymnals, *The Sacred Harp* has remained popular into the present day, and enthusiasts around the world regularly gather to sing from its pages. As such, the tradition of shape-note singing is today most commonly referred to as **Sacred Harp singing**.

Participants in modern Sacred Harp sing adhes to a number of practices that originated in the singing school movement. To begin with, their purpose is not worship but music marking. Many Sacred Harp enthusiasts also profess Christian beliefs,



**Image 11.27:** Pictured here are participants in a 19th-century singing school that took place in Keene, New Hampshire.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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**Image 11.28: In this photograph by Brent Moore, we see a song leader standing in the center of the hollow square. He is beating time with his arm.**

Source: Flickr

Attribution: Brent Moore

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and sings often begin and end with prayer, but Sacred Harp thrives because participants are committed to the music.

At a typical sing, participants sit in a formation known as a “hollow square,” with singers—seated according to vocal part—facing a central open space. Although the vocal parts are gendered in typical choirs, this is not the case in Sacred Harp: Women will frequently sing the tenor part up an octave, while men will sing the soprano part down an octave. There is no conductor. Instead, participants will take turns selecting hymns, which each will direct from the central position. The person who chooses the hymn will specify which verses are to be sung, and someone will provide the starting pitches for each part. Then the group will sing through the hymn once on the syllables before turning to the text.

The vocal style associated with Sacred Harp singing is also unusual. Participants do not tend to approach their task with nuance. Instead, each sings as loudly and exuberantly as they can, often accenting the rhythms with physical movement (something that is expressly prohibited in choral singing). The tempos are steady. Finally, there is never instrumental accompaniment.

“Amazing Grace,” paired with the tune “New Britain,” appears in both *Southern Harmony* and *The Sacred Harp*. The *Southern Harmony* version contains only three voice parts (soprano, tenor, and bass), but editions of *The Sacred Harp* eventually added an alto part. (Experienced singers might notice that the soprano part is very high. This notation, however, is not meant to be taken literally, and



**Image 11.29: The Southern Harmony version of "Amazing Grace," published in 1835, contains only three voice parts.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons  
Attribution: William Walker  
License: Public Domain

#### NEW BRITAIN. C.M.

Columbian Harmony, 1829.



**Image 11.30: The Sacred Harp version of "Amazing Grace," published in 1844, contains four voice parts.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons  
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License: Public Domain

most groups will sing the hymn in a lower key.) The familiar melody is in the tenor in both versions, while the other parts provide harmony above and below. As a result, a performance of this version of the hymn strikes most listeners as familiar, but somehow strange.

Our rendition of "Amazing Grace" was recorded at the Southwest Sacred Harp Singing Convention in McMahan, TX, in 2011. After an initial pass using the syllables, the participants sing the first four verses of Newton's text.

### "Amazing Grace" in the Southern Gospel Tradition<sup>6</sup>

Soon after the 1844 publication of *The Sacred Harp*, a rift emerged in the Southern hymn publishing community. In 1846, Jesse Aiken published *The Christian Minstrel*, which introduced a new shape-note system using seven shapes. This development seemed natural enough. As one advocate for the new system put it, "Would any parent having seven children, ever think of calling them by four names?" Aiken's hymnal provoked a virulent debate. While some publishers refused to adopt the new system, others were won over. William Walker himself switched to seven-shape notation with his 1866 hymnal *Christian Harmony*. Eventually, the seven-shape system emerged victorious.

6.

"Amazing Grace"

Performance: The Inspirations (1976)

Other changes came upon the hymn publishing industry as well. By the late 19th century, the stark harmonies of *The Sacred Harp* had largely been eschewed in favor of more pleasing harmonies derived from popular music. Hymn composers

moved away from the minor mode—which dominates the pages of *The Sacred Harp*—and began to write in a more cheerful vein. Composers also abandoned the archaic practice of placing the melody in the tenor voice, instead putting it in the soprano and supporting it with accompaniment in the lower parts. Finally, piano accompaniment was introduced in the early 20th century as churches gained access to instruments.

All of these characteristics describe the **Southern gospel** tradition, which continues to flourish. Southern gospel music is driven by hymn composers and publishers, who supply a steady diet of new hymns. These are sung at conventions, which attract vast numbers of singers eager to test their reading ability on unfamiliar music. At the same time, Southern gospel devotees enjoy singing old favorites, such as “Amazing Grace.” Although Southern gospel music does not belong to a single Christian denomination, it is closely associated with evangelical branches such as the Southern Baptist Convention.

In the early 20th century, Southern gospel publishers began sponsoring professional quartets to sing their music. These quartets—which were at first all-male—took the singing conventions, where they would perform the latest hymns from a particular publisher. They also participated in revivals, gave concerts, sang on the radio, and released commercial recordings. It might be argued that Southern gospel transformed from a **participatory** musical tradition to a **performative** one, for today many people think of Southern gospel primarily as a commercial music genre. At the same time, collective singing of Southern gospel music continues to take place in churches and at singing conventions.



**Image 11.31: Although Southern gospel quartets were traditionally all male, modern singing groups typically include women.**

Source: Picryl

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Our example was recorded by the Inspirations in 1976. The Inspirations follow solidly in the model established in the early 20th century by publishers' quartets. The group was formed in 1964 when Martin Cook, a high school chemistry teacher in Bryson City, NC, began singing gospel music with four of his students. A couple years later they founded a gospel music festival, Singing in the Smokies, and by 1969 the Inspirations were a full-time professional group. A string of number-one gospel hits in the early 1970s cemented their reputation.

The Inspirations' recording of "Amazing Grace" was created during a live performance in Warner Robbins, GA. This is important, both because the sounds of the audience contribute to the effectiveness of the recording and because the release of live albums is a meaningful practice in the gospel tradition. After all, this music is intended to have a profound and personal impact on the listener. The Inspirations describe themselves as "an enthusiastic, sincere, clean-cut group of fundamental conservative Christian gentlemen with a desire and an objective to witness to a needful and sinful world through the medium of Gospel Music." They make music not to entertain an audience but to save it.

The first verse is sung by lead tenor Archie Watkins. As is typical of the genre, he sings the melody in the highest part of his range. This means that the top notes sound almost like cries. We can hear that he is straining to reach them—an effort that is emotionally compelling and communicates the sincerity of the message. This type of singing has roots in the tradition of secular Appalachian music-making, and can be heard in banjo songs and bluegrass. Watkins does not sing with a steady pulse, as we heard in the Sacred Harp rendition, but takes his time to express each individual word.

For the second verse, the ensemble enters to supply a wordless harmony, switching to text only for the final two words. The third verse is sung on text by the entire ensemble, although Watkins high melody still stands out from the texture. We also hear the low bass singing of Mike Holcomb—another characteristic feature of the Southern gospel music.

The third verse sung by the Inspirations, however, is not the third verse of Newton's text:

When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise,  
Than when we first begun.

In fact, this verse wasn't written by Newton at all. It was first published in the 1790 Virginian hymnal *A Collection of Sacred Ballads*, in which it was incorporated into the much older hymn "Jerusalem, My Happy Home." (In *The Sacred Harp*, the verse appears as part of "Jerusalem, My Happy Home" and "Ninety-Fifth Psalm," but is not included in "Amazing Grace.") The first person to associate this verse

with “Amazing Grace” was Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the 1852 anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In Stowe’s narrative, Uncle Tom sings three verses of “Amazing Grace”—two of Newton’s verses and the new one—to mark his moment of greatest spiritual need.

It is typical for favorite verses to appear in more than one hymn. This is the result of oral tradition. A certain verse—memorable for its imagery or message—sticks in a singer’s head. They then add the verse to another hymn, one that has a tune with the same pattern of strong and weak beats. It is believed that Stowe was drawing from African American oral tradition in particular when she included this verse in “Amazing Grace.” However, it was not included in a hymnal until the 1910 *Coronation Hymns*.

### “Amazing Grace” in the Black Gospel Tradition<sup>7</sup>

Black gospel is not unrelated to Southern gospel. The two traditions share a great deal in common and have always influenced one another. In the period during which these traditions developed, however, American society was highly segregated—by Jim Crow laws in the South and by less visible means in the North. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a unique tradition of music, based in part on African American musical tradition, should have arisen among black worshippers.

7.



“Amazing Grace”  
Performance: Aretha Franklin (1972)

The style of music making that would come to be known as black gospel emerged first in the Holiness churches of the early 20th century. These congregations traced their roots to the revival meetings of the Second Great Awakening, in which many African Americans had participated. They favored a highly expressive and emotional form of worship, in which individual congregants might be moved to speak or sing.

During the 1920s, musicians in Holiness churches began to incorporate popular influences into worship. These included styles of piano playing derived from ragtime, percussion and brass instruments associated with jazz, and blues-inspired vocals. Although some churchgoers were skeptical about the inclusion of secular sounds in worship, the music gained popularity with the success of early recordings by artists like Arizona Dranes, a blind pianist and singer who belonged to the Church of God in Christ.

In the 1930s, male quartets—much like those in the Southern gospel tradition—and choirs came to the fore as black gospel gained followers. Although the style borrowed from popular music, it maintained strict separation from the commercial



**Image 11.32: The Golden Gate Quartet, seen here performing in 1964, was founded in 1934 and remains active today, although with new members.**

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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world, and gospel singers who made secular recordings were often shunned by the church community. At the same time, black gospel exercised enormous influence on the development of popular music. This influence is especially evident in the singing styles that emerged in rhythm 'n' blues and, later, soul. It is no wonder that many successful gospel artists were attracted by the possibility of mainstream popular success.

Aretha Franklin (1942–2018) was among the most prominent of these crossover singers, although anxieties about secular music had largely subsided by the time her career took off. Franklin was the daughter of a Baptist minister, C.L. Franklin, and she first sang in the church. Her father was something of a celebrity, and Franklin got to know many of the great gospel singers while she was still a child. At the age of 12, she began accompanying her father on preaching tours, for which she would

provide stirring music. At 18, however, she decided to leave gospel behind for a career in popular music. With her father's support, she moved to New York City and signed with Columbia Records.

Franklin did not flourish at Columbia, and it was not until she moved to Atlantic Records in 1967 that her career took off. Her version of "Respect," which topped the R&B and pop charts that year, was just the first in a chain of hit singles and albums. At the height of her success, however, Franklin returned to her roots and recorded a gospel album, the 1972 *Amazing Grace*. It was to be the top-selling album of her entire career.

*Amazing Grace* was recorded live over the course of two evening concerts at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles. Franklin was backed up by the Southern California Community Choir and the prominent gospel singer Reverend James Cleveland. The title track, "Amazing Grace," is the longest on the double album, clocking in at nearly eleven minutes. (Our version, taken from the master recording, is over sixteen minutes long.) The selection was featured near the end of the first evening's concert, and was without doubt the high point of the show.

As with the Inspirations' recording discussed above, the fact that Franklin's "Amazing Grace" was recorded live is important. The sounds of the audience help us to visualize the church setting and remind us that this is worship music. We don't just hear the song—we also hear people being moved and transformed by the song. The shouts and applause of the listeners are integral to the performance. The audience noise also helps us to understand the motivations of the singer. Aretha is not just performing a song: She is expressing her deeply held beliefs in an intensely personal way. Finally, we can hear how the audience shapes the performance. As they respond to Franklin's singing, they also inspire her to new heights of expression.

Franklin's singing style is emblematic of the black gospel tradition. She in fact only sings two verses of the hymn: the first and third. However, she weaves them into an epic drama, full of twists and turns. Every vowel of the text is drawn out in a long **melisma** containing many notes, and there is never a sense of pulse. Although the first verse is elongated and intense, we soon find out that Franklin was only getting started. The emotional energy builds with the third verse, in which Franklin brightens her timbre as she moves to the top of her range. She also adds a great deal of new text, which gives the impression of having been improvised



**Image 11.33:** This 1967 photograph shows Aretha Franklin five years before she recorded "Amazing Grace."

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Attribution: Atlantic Records

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on the spot. With these added words, she personalizes the message and seems to confess her own sins. She speaks directly to the people in the room through music.

In the final line of the verse, however, Franklin abandons the texts and insteads hums an additional iteration of the melody. By doing so, she draws down the emotional energy for the purpose of producing an even more dramatic final conclusion. Upon returning to the text of verse three, Franklin inauguates a series of call and response passages between herself and the choir/audience. Again, the verse fails to conclude, and the choir enters with the third-line text. It seems almost as if they are trying to provide Franklin with the strength to finish the hymn. When Franklin returns with the first line of the verse, she builds her singing into shouts and cries before finally arriving “home.”

These three renditions of “Amazing Grace” are remarkably different. Variations in performing forces—choir vs male quartet vs solo female vocalist with piano accompaniment—do not even begin to explain the variations in aesthetic and emotional impact. Instead, we have to examine the vocal styles that are characteristic of each performing tradition—styles that in turn make sense only in the context of worship practices that are each unique to a time and place. In the end, we see how a hymn written centuries ago by a reformed slave trader can embody and express the spiritual values of diverse individuals and sects.

## JOHN COLTRANE, A *LOVE SUPREME*

All of the compositions we have examined in this chapter were originally intended for practical use in a worship service. In our exploration of “Amazing Grace,” however, we encountered instances of performances—Aretha Franklin’s, for example—that brought the hymn into less formal realms. Franklin’s concerts probably provided a worship experience to some of those present, and her performance was an expression of deeply held belief. The essential purpose of the concerts, however, was

to create a commercial recording, which is in turn available for consumption as entertainment.

With our final example, we will encounter a similar instance of personal belief influencing the commercial output of a performing artist. John Coltrane’s album *A Love Supreme* (recorded in 1964, released in 1965) was certainly never intended for use in a place of worship. All the same, it was clearly intended by the performer as an act of worship, although the specifics of Coltrane’s belief system—outlined below—continue to elude researchers.



**Image 11.34:** Coltrane is pictured here in 1963.

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John Coltrane (1926-1967) was one of the great jazz innovators of the 20th century. He began playing saxophone as a teenager in Philadelphia. Coltrane joined the Navy during World War II, where his talent was recognized and he received the rare honor of being permitted to play with the base swing band even though he had not enlisted as a musician. Upon leaving the military, he toured with various bands and began to meet and play with the jazz luminaries of the era.

Coltrane began his post-war career playing bebop, a high-intensity form of jazz in which virtuosic soloists exhibit their skills. Bebop is performed by **jazz combos**—small ensembles with a single performer per instrument. A combo will almost always include piano, bass, and drums, with the addition of one more players on a melody instrument (saxophone, trumpet, and trombone are the most common). In bebop, the combo will begin by playing a set melody, usually underlaid with complex harmonies. This composition is termed a **head** and is notated on a **lead sheet**. Then the members of the ensemble will take turns improvising solos over the chord progression. Coltrane composed and recorded perhaps the most difficult of all bebop heads, “Giant Steps,”<sup>8</sup> in 1959 (released on the album *Giant Steps* in 1960).

8.



“Giant Steps” (1959) is perhaps Coltrane’s most famous composition—and performance.

Like many jazz musicians of the era, Coltrane struggled with drug and alcohol abuse, and he became a heroin addict. In 1957, however, Coltrane quit heroin cold turkey, locking himself in his Philadelphia home to battle withdrawal. He later described “a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life.” He indeed went on to produce his greatest work, and religious themes would increasingly dominate his music for the rest of his career. Coltrane’s most compelling spiritual statement, by all accounts, was his 1965 album *A Love Supreme*.

In the liner notes to *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane described his 1957 experience: “At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music. [...] This album is a humble offering to Him. An attempt to say “THANK YOU GOD” through our work, even as we do in our hearts and with our tongues.” There is no doubt that Coltrane intended his album as an expression of his profound spiritual thanksgiving to god—but it is not clear exactly who or what “god” was to Coltrane.

Both Coltrane’s maternal and paternal grandfathers were pastors in the African Methodist Episcopal church, and there is no doubt that his childhood experiences with Christian worship influenced both his beliefs and musical expression. However, Coltrane became increasingly interested in non-Christian spiritual beliefs in his adult years. His first wife, with whom he maintained a close

friendship even after they divorced, was a Muslim convert. Later he took to studying Eastern religions, and he was known to pore over the religious texts of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism with equal fervor. In the liner notes to his 1965 album *Meditations*, Coltrane stated bluntly, "I believe in all religions."

*A Love Supreme* is in four parts: "Acknowledgement," "Resolution," "Pursuance," and "Psalm." For this reason, the complete work is often described as a suite. The parts range from seven to eleven minutes in length, and were recorded in a single session on December 9, 1964. The performers, in addition to Coltrane, were McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass, and Elvin Jones on drums. This ensemble, known today as the "classic quartet," recorded many of Coltrane's greatest albums.

Although *A Love Supreme* is generally regarded as a unique artistic work that cannot easily be categorized, it can also be understood as an example of **modal jazz**. In modal jazz, the traditional chords of bebop are replaced by harmonies built on modal scales—those other than major and minor. With the emphasis shifted away from harmony, performers focus more on melodic development, rhythmic intricacy, timbral variation, and emotional expression. Examples of modal jazz tend to be slower and more exploratory than bebop recordings. Throughout, *A Love Supreme* avoids explicit melodic statements or clear rhythmic frameworks. There is no "tune," and the listener cannot easily find a downbeat or identify the meter. Instead, the recording gives the impression of transcending the confines of "jazz" and offering a window directly into the players' souls.

"Acknowledgement"<sup>9</sup> opens with the reverberation of a gong and cymbal rolls. Out of this wash of sound emerge Tyner's piano chords and Coltrane's improvisation on a four-note figure. Next we hear the primary theme of the album: a four-note, repeated motif played by Garrison on the bass. When Coltrane enters again, it is with the same four notes we heard him play at the opening of the track. He slowly adds notes and builds in energy, eventually using the technique of **overblowing** to create squawking notes in the high range of the instrument. We hear the same rhythmic patterns again and again throughout his solo. Finally, Coltrane plays the four-note motif from the bass again and again, in dozens of different keys. The track concludes with members of the combo singing the motif on the text "a love supreme" before Garrison plays a closing bass solo. By singing, the performers reveal what had hitherto been a secret meaning behind the motif that dominates the composition.



**Image 11.35:** The album cover for *A Love Supreme* is stark and serious.

Source: Flickr

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9.



“Acknowledgment” from *A Love Supreme*  
Composer: John Coltrane  
Performance: The John Coltrane Quartet (1964)

The final part, “Psalm,”<sup>10</sup> also has a secret text. This time, the text is a poem of praise authored by Coltrane and included in the album’s liner notes. It uses phraseology and language that is familiar from Christian worship, but at no point does it explicitly indicate that Coltrane is worshipping the Christian god. Similarly, the title “Psalm”—a reference to the Psalms of Christian and Jewish tradition—clearly refers to something other than a literal Biblical Psalm. Although there is no sung text in the recording, the listener can easily follow the words as Coltrane plays, since his phrasing closely matches that of the poem.

10.



“Psalm” from *A Love Supreme*  
Composer: John Coltrane  
Performance: The John Coltrane Quartet (1964)

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

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