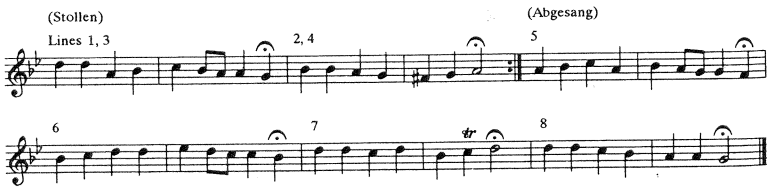
But I can think of no more spectacular demonstration of Bach's powers of synthesis, his unparalleled combinatorial genius—all in the service, I submit, of a "universal" vision unprecedented in the history of Western music—than in one of his church compositions: specifically, in the opening chorus of the cantata *Jesu, der du meine Seele,* Cantata No. 78. Cantata No. 78 is "just another" Sunday cantata, part of a series that Bach had composed at the rate of about one per week over a period of approximately three years that had begun with his arrival in Leipzig in May of 1723. Cantata No. 78 was written in 1724 for the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, a day that fell on September 10. Since Bach had composed a new cantata the previous week (Cantata No. 33, first performed on the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 3, 1724), he most likely wrote Cantata No. 78 in the week beginning on Monday, September 4. I imagine that Bach spent at most three or four days engaged in the composition of the entire work, for he would have had to leave a couple of days for the writing out of parts and for at least one rehearsal, I should think, before the performance on September 10. In short, I doubt whether Bach could have devoted more than one day—it must have been Monday, September 4—to the composition of the chorus I am about to discuss.

The movement is normally described as a chorale-fantasy chorus because it is an elaborate setting, for chorus, of a German "chorale," that is, a congregational hymn—in this instance the chorale *Jesu, der du meine Seele* (Jesus, Thou my weary spirit), by the seventeenth-century poet, Johann Rist. Bach's approach to the movement is a conventional one in that he presents the traditional melody of the chorale—in the soprano part—as a *cantus firmus,* that is, set distinctly apart from the surrounding voices and instruments. In adopting the melody of the chorale Bach also adopts its form: the so-called *Barform,* consisting of a pair of lines or phrases that are repeated (the *Stollen*) and then followed by new material (the *Abgesang*). The form can be represented schematically as AAB. The melody of the chorale goes as shown in Ex. 4.2 (as notated by Bach in the final movement of BWV 78).

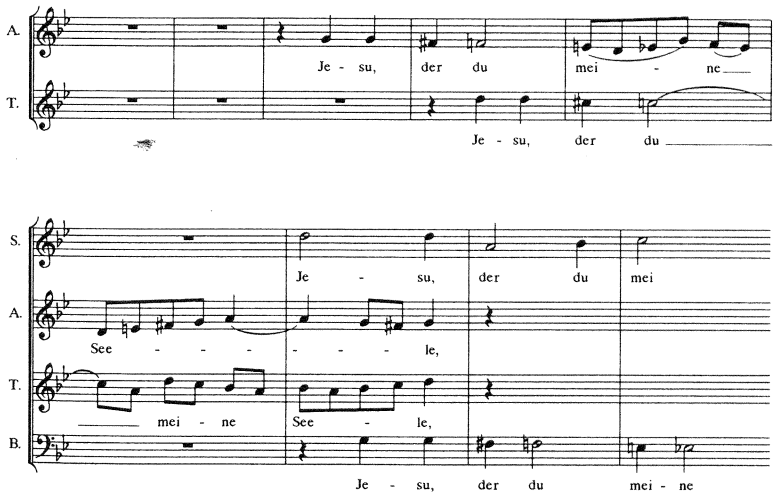
Example 4.2. Chorale melody: Jesu, der du meine Seele



Both the *Barform* and the *cantus-firmus* technique can be traced back to the Middle Ages: the *Barform* is found in the courtly love songs of the German *Minnesänger* as early as the twelfth century; the *cantus-firmus* technique formed the basis of the earliest examples of Western polyphony dating from the eleventh century or even earlier.

The lower voices of the chorus, for their part, offer a polyphonic commentary, in imitative texture, as in a fugue, on each line of the text preceding its entrance, along with the official hymn melody, in the soprano *cantus firmus.* This is a compositional principle associated with the Renaissance motet of the sixteenth century, specifically, with that of the so-called *cantus-firmus* motet. (The imitation preceding the first line of the chorale goes as shown in Ex. 4.3.)

Example 4.3. BWV 78/1, mm. 15–23



Now these vocal episodes, each consisting of the *cantus-firmus* melody in the soprano and its polyphonic preview in the lower voices, are separated from one another by a refrain of sorts in the orchestra. This refrain, or ritornello, also appears at the beginning and end of the movement and thus provides a frame for the choral sections. The ritornello principle, in which a relatively constant theme or melody recurs in alternation with a succession of contrasting and changing episodes (such as the chorale phrases here), is the controlling formal idea of the mature baroque concerto of the early eighteenth century, as it was developed by Bach's slightly older Italian contemporaries, in particular Giuseppe Torelli and Antonio Vivaldi. The ritornello melody of our chorus, as it is presented at the outset of the movement, goes as shown in Ex. 4.4.

Example 4.4. BWV 78/1, mm. 1–7

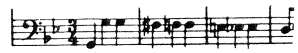
A most striking feature of this melody is its rhythm, as depicted in Ex. 4.5.

Example 4.5. BWV 78/1, mm. 1–4: Rhythm

and also its regular phrase structure. Every phrase is exactly the same length; they are all four measures long. In short, the ritornello melody has the phrase structure of a dance and the rhythmic character, specifically, of the saraßande—one of the standard items in the contemporary French dance suite.

There is one further, crucial, structural element in this movement, one that pervades it virtually without interrruption from beginning to end: the ever-recurrent phrase first presented in the bass but later appearing in other parts as well (see Ex. 4.6).

Example 4.6. BWV 78/1, mm. 1–4: Continuo



This is a *basso ostinato*—a relatively short phrase whose relentless repetitions provide the basis for the passacaglia or chaconne; essentially a set of variations on a dance pattern whose origins can be traced back to early seventeenth-century Spain. The particular *basso ostinato* Bach uses here with its rather mournful half-step descent from the tonic to the dominant is the so-called *lamento* bass frequently encountered in dirges and elegies in seventeenth-century opera. (The most well-known example today, no doubt—although it is inconceivable that Bach would have known it—is the lament "When I am laid in earth" from Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas.*)

In sum, *Jesu, der du meine Seele* is one of Bach's most complex creations—a compositional *tour de force* that simultaneously observes or fulfills no fewer than five distinct principles of organization, some of which, one would have thought, were mutually exclusive—such as the combination of the repetitive *basso ostinato* with the ongoing *cantus-firmus* melody. At one and the same time the movement is a

modern Italian concerto—but based on a ritornello in the style of a sarabande from a modern French dance suite; it is a seventeenth-century passacaglia, that is, a set of variations; but it is also a polyphonic motet constructed both on "points of imitation" reminiscent of Renaissance church music of the sixteenth century as well as on a *cantus firmus* according to compositional principles extending back to the Middle Ages; on yet another level the movement is a German Lutheran chorale in *Barform:* AAB—writ very large indeed.

It is virtually impossible to imagine a grander, more comprehensive, more "universal" synthesis of historical and national styles than Bach has achieved in this movement—incorporating as it does elements of the secular as well as the sacred, the instrumental as well as the vocal; a movement whose frame of reference embraces both the Roman Catholic motet of the sixteenth century and the Lutheran chorale and whose procedures are indebted to the medieval *cantus-firmus* setting, the variation technique of the seventeenth-century passacaglia, and the modern Italian concerto and the French dance suite.

But Bach's achievement here is not only prodigious, it is in fact prophetic in its objective of transcending the cultural limitations of geography and history, of place and time, in order to create—once again—a "universal" artwork. For the outlook of his contemporaries, you will recall, was confined by their predilection to conceive of and divide musical practices and traditions along national and other lines. The idea of a universal musical style—of music as a universal language—was not to emerge for another half-century: during the classical period, in the 1770s and 1780s. The composer Christoph Willibald Gluck spoke in 1773 of his wish to write a music that "would appeal to all peoples" and "wipe out the ridiculous differences in national music." And he would have been gratified to read, a dozen years later, that his music represented "the universal language of our continent." Joseph Haydn once remarked, "My language is understood in the whole world."[14] The ultimate form of this universal musical language, admittedly, was not that pursued by Bach. It was rooted rather in the formal conventions and procedures of the basically Italian sonata colored by folk music idioms imported from many national and ethnic traditions and enriched with sophisticated harmonic and contrapuntal techniques inherited from the Germans—above all from Bach. The new, more popularistic, more democratic aesthetic ideal demanded a lightness, simplicity, and immediacy of appeal far removed from Bach's clearly contrapuntally inspired notion of a musical universality that was universal by virtue of being all-inclusive and all-encompassing: not so much a universal musical language as a musical "universe"—as Goethe had said: "as if the eternal harmony were communing with itself as might have happened in God's bosom shortly before the creation of the world."