

= Ach wie flüchtig , ach wie nichtig , BWV 26 =

Ach wie flüchtig , ach wie nichtig (Ah , how fleeting , ah how insignificant) , BWV 26 , is a church cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach . He composed the chorale cantata in Leipzig for the 24th Sunday after Trinity and first performed it on 19 November 1724 .

The cantata is based upon Michael Franck 's hymn " Schmücke dich , o liebe Seele " , with a melody by Johann Crüger (1652) . It is the only time that Bach used this hymn . Its theme , the transience of human life , is the only connection to the prescribed gospel reading . The first and last stanza are used unchanged in both text and tune : the former is treated as a chorale fantasia , the latter as a four @-@ part closing chorale . An unknown librettist paraphrased the inner stanzas as arias and recitatives . Bach scored the cantata for four vocal soloists , a four @-@ part choir , and a Baroque instrumental ensemble of horn , flute , three oboes , strings and continuo .

= = History and words = =

Bach wrote the cantata in 1724 in his second year in Leipzig for the 24th Sunday after Trinity . That year , Bach composed a cycle of chorale cantatas , begun on the first Sunday after Trinity . The prescribed readings for the Sunday were from the Epistle to the Colossians , a prayer for the Colossians (Colossians 1 : 9 ? 14) , and from the Gospel of Matthew , the story of the Raising of Jairus ' daughter (Matthew 9 : 18 ? 26) . The cantata is based on the hymn in 13 stanzas by Michael Franck (1652) , to a melody by Johann Crüger (1661) , " a meditation on the transience of human life and of all earthly goods " . This aspect is the only connection to the gospel . An unknown poet retained the first and the last stanza unchanged as movements 1 and 6 of the cantata . He derived the inner movements as a sequence of alternating arias and recitatives from the inner stanzas . John Eliot Gardiner points out that " several of Bach 's late Trinity season cantatas " concentrate on " the brevity of human life and the futility of earthly hopes " .

Bach first performed the cantata on 19 November 1724 . It is the only time that he used this hymn .

= = Scoring and structure = =

Bach structured the cantata in six movements . The text and tune of the hymn appear unchanged in the outer choral movements , a chorale fantasia and a four @-@ part closing chorale , which frame a sequence of alternating arias and recitatives . Bach scored the work for four vocal soloists (soprano , alto , tenor , bass) , a four @-@ part choir and a Baroque instrumental ensemble of a horn (Co) doubling the soprano in the chorale , flauto traverso (Ft) , three oboes (Ob) , two violins (VI) , viola (Va) , organ (Org) and basso continuo .

In the following table of the movements , the scoring follows the Neue Bach @-@ Ausgabe . The keys and time signatures are taken from Alfred Dürr , using the symbol for common time (4 / 4) .

= = Music = =

= = = 1 = = =

The opening chorus , " Ach wie flüchtig , ach wie nichtig " (Ah , how fleeting , ah how insignificant) , is a chorale fantasia . The instruments play concertante music , to which the soprano sings the cantus firmus line by line . The lower voices act as a " self @-@ contained group " , mostly in homophony , and " declaim the individual lines of text in unison at the end of each choral passage , using a melodic formula derived from the beginning of the hymn . " Bach illustrates the imagery of the text , " fleetingness and insubstantiality " in motifs such as " abrupt chords separated by pauses and ... hurrying scale figures " . Gardiner comments :

Long before the first statement of Franck 's hymn (sopranos doubled by cornetto) Bach establishes the simile of man 's life to a rising mist which will soon disperse . Fleet @-@ footed

scales , crossing and recrossing , joining and dividing , create a mood of phantasmal vapour .

The Musicologist Julian Mincham compares the instrumental music to " mist and fog , images which imply movements of wind and air " and hears the lower voices as " evincing a feeling of primeval power and solidarity " .

== 2 ==

In the first aria , the text " So schnell ein rauschend Wasser schießt " (As quickly as rushing water) is illustrated in the flute , the violin and the tenor voice by " fast @-@ flowing " music , " each musician required to keep changing functions ? to respond , imitate , echo or double one another ? while variously contributing to the insistent onwardness of the tumbling torrent " .

== 3 ==

In a recitative for alto , " Die Freude wird zur Traurigkeit " (Joy becomes sadness) , images such as flowers speak of transience until the grave . The Bach scholar Klaus Hofmann describes it as a " far @-@ reaching coloratura [which] culminates in an uneasy dissonance " .

== 4 ==

In the last aria , an " unusual oboe trio " accompanies the bass boice in " An irdische Schätze das Herze zu hängen " (To hang one 's heart on earthly treasures) . Gardiner comments : " He scores this Totentanz (Dance of the dead) for three oboes and continuo supporting his bass soloist in a mock bourrée " , the oboes undermining in " throbbing accompaniment ... those earthly pleasures by which men are seduced " , then representing " through jagged figures ... the tongues of flame which will soon reduce them to ashes , and finally in hurtling semiquaver scales of 6 / 4 chords ... surging waves which will tear all worldly things apart " . Mincham sees a connection of the runs to those of movement 1 , but points out how different their function is here :

now depicting thunder flames , stormy seas and the destruction of the world . The descending scales played in unison by the three oboes have great force . The vocalist has several prominent images , notably the long melisma on the word " zerschmettert " (shatter) and the weird , descending chromatic phrase towards the end , suggestive of a world of chaos and foolishness .

== 5 ==

A recitative for soprano , " Die höchste Herrlichkeit und Pracht " (The highest glory and magnificence) , expresses that even highest power will not escape death .

== 6 ==

The closing chorale , " Ach wie flüchtig , ach wie nichtig " (Ah , how fleeting , ah how insignificant) , is a four @-@ part setting .

= = Selected recordings = =

The listing is taken from the selection on the Bach @-@ Cantatas website . Choirs and orchestras are roughly marked as large by red background ; instrumental groups playing period instruments in historically informed performances are highlighted green under the header Instr ..