



Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit

by J. S. Bach

Arranged and Typeset by Peter Billam

For Piano

© Peter J Billam, 2001

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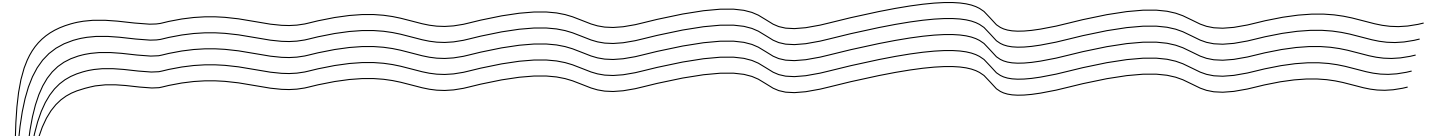
Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit

Some composers produce their best work in their youth, and then either retire or deteriorate in old age; others, such as Mozart, Beethoven or Schubert, improve steadily, and their late works are their greatest. Johann Sebastian Bach is the most extraordinary example. In March and April of 1750 he had undergone two "eye operations", whatever that meant in 1750, and by July he was on his death bed, where he dictated his last composition to his pupil and son-in-law Johann Christoph Altnikol. It is a chorale prelude for organ, BWV668, on a hymn tune written by Martin Luther himself. Most of the old hymn tunes have more than one set of words, and this one has two :

*Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein
und wissen nicht, wo aus noch ein,
und finden weder Hülf noch Rat,
ob wir gleich sorgen früh und spat:
so ist dies unser Trost allein,
daß wir zusammen allgemein
dich anrufen, o treuer Gott,
um Rettung aus der Angst und Not.*

*Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit,
o Gott und dich demütig bitt:
wend' dein genädig angesicht
vor mir betrübtem Sünder nicht.*

Both hymns are appropriate to the approach of death; but the first sings of deepest distress, and the second of something far more glorious. So Luther's tune itself is ambiguous; it could refer to either set of words. In any chorale prelude the hymn-tune is woven into counterpoint with faster-moving motifs in other voices, and in this particularly strict counterpoint Bach constrains himself to taking these motifs from speeded-up phrases from the hymn-tune itself; so every note here stems from Martin Luther. However, the phrases that Bach has chosen for his motifs only fit one of the sets of words, namely *Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit*. The moment of death can be seen as painful, or as glorious; by his choice of notes Bach makes clear his point of view.



The chorale prelude is deeply connected to humanity. The voices lie within the ranges of a choir, the natural tempo of 72 quavers per minute refers to the human heart, and at the flow of nine bars per minute each bar coincides with the full breath in and out at deep rest; both these values were codified as the *Integer Valor* of the Middle Ages.

The intensely clear personal expression arising from the assumption of difficult technical constraints, the modesty, and yet also the exploit, of composing with only Martin Luther's notes, the wonderful beauty of the piece and the personal circumstances under which it was written, combine to make this chorale prelude one of the greatest achievements of the western musical tradition.

It is offered here in a new edition, arranged for piano. The phrasing and emphasis of all voices should accord to the text. The chorale melody (entering at bars 8, 19, 29 and 40) should be stronger and more sustained than the faster-moving contrapuntal voices. There are two impractical stretches; on the sixth quaver of bar 9, a simple way is to take the bass F#, sustain it with the pedal, play the tenor A as a dotted quaver, and play the bass G by stretching the ninth; on the fourth quaver of bar 10, the simplest is to take the low D, sustain it with the pedal, and play the F# as a semiquaver. The long notes can be discreetly retaken, and preferably on the offbeats, so that for example the final G of fourteen beats could be taken as 3 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 2 + 3 beats. Worth particular attention is the extraordinary beauty of the final cadence.

Peter J Billam
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Measures 1-4 of the piece. The music is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a treble and bass clef. Measure 1 starts with a whole rest in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 2 has a quarter note G in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 3 has a quarter note A in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 4 has a quarter note B in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass.

Measures 5-8. Measure 5 has a quarter note A in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 6 has a quarter note B in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 7 has a quarter note C in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 8 has a quarter note D in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass.

Measures 9-12. Measure 9 has a quarter note E in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 10 has a quarter note F# in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 11 has a quarter note G in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 12 has a quarter note A in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass.

Measures 13-16. Measure 13 has a quarter note B in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 14 has a quarter note C in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 15 has a quarter note D in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 16 has a quarter note E in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass.

Measures 17-20. Measure 17 has a quarter note F# in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 18 has a quarter note G in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 19 has a quarter note A in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 20 has a quarter note B in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass.

Measures 21-24. Measure 21 has a quarter note C in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 22 has a quarter note D in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 23 has a quarter note E in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass. Measure 24 has a quarter note F# in the treble and a quarter note G in the bass.

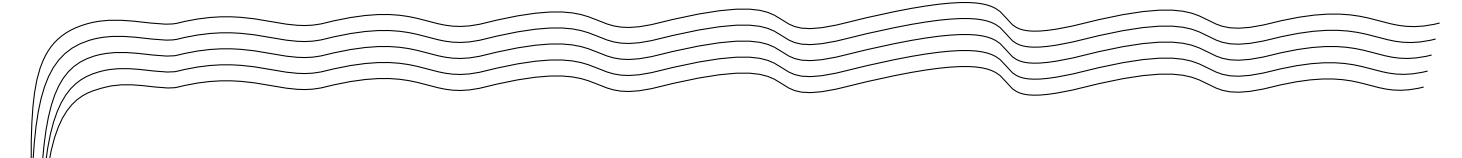
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The image displays a piano score for J.S. Bach's chorale 'Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit'. The score is arranged for piano and typeset in 2000 by Peter J. Billam. It consists of six systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is common time (C). The score is marked with measure numbers 25, 30, 35, and 40. The music features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are also some dynamic markings like 'z' (zorglos) and '7' (sevens). The piece concludes with a final cadence in the last system.



Peter Billam was born in London in 1948, studied piano, and lived in Switzerland from 1973 to 1983, where he studied composition, classical guitar, flute and voice, worked as Musical Director of the *Théâtre Populaire Romand*, and as recording engineer, record producer and computer programmer. He moved to Tasmania in 1983, lectured in composition at the Conservatorium, conducted recorder ensembles and choirs, studied recorder, voice and harpsichord. He founded **www.pjb.com.au**, becoming the first composer to sell scores on-line, with on-line delivery, taking scores from Composer to Performer in one immediate step. *Www.pjb.com.au* offers a new approach to music publishing. These pieces are **written to be read, made to be played !**

Compositions at *www.pjb.com.au* include: *Five Short Pieces*, guitar, 1979; *Divisions on an Italian Ground*, flute and guitar, 1980; *Five Rounds*, choir, 1986; *Go Forth and Multiply*, choir, 1986; *Three Violin Duets*, 1987; *Fable*, for piano, 1987; *To Erich Jantsch*, SAATTB recorders, 1988; *A Suite of Curves*, trombone (or horn) and piano, 1990; *Two Recorder Duets*, alto recorders, or other melody instruments, 1991; *Trombone Quintet*, trombone, flute, piano, bass, and percussion, 1994; *Three Songs*, on poems by Jack Kerouac, Vikram Seth and Dylan Thomas, voice and piano (only the first and third of these are available), 1994; *Piano Study*, piano, 1994; *Four Dances*, various ensembles including recorder quartet, string quartet, 1995; *The Poet in the Clouds*, on a poem by S. T. Coleridge, SATB choir, 1995; *Tres Casidas del Diván del Tamarit*, on poems by Federico García Lorca, voice and piano, 1997; *Three Suites*, for the solo line, piano, and piano and a solo line, 2000; *Die Zeiten*, on poems by Kästner, Bachman and Jünger, choir (only the second and third of these are available), 2000; *Three Duets* for flutes, 2001; *For Four Hands* for piano four hands, 2002; *Three Preludes* for piano, 2003; *Second Solo Suite* for flute, violin, viola or cello, 2003; *Guitar Duet* for two guitars, 2006; *We Who Mourn* for choir, 2007; *Trio With Guitar* for guitar and two clarinets or two recorders or two violas, 2008.

Arrangements include: By J. S. Bach: *Trio BWV 655*, piano and flute; *Vor deinen Thron BWV 668*, piano; *Fugue in F minor BWV 689*, SATB recorders; *Flute Sonata BWV 1031* transposed into G major for alto recorder and keyboard; *Flute Sonata BWV 1032* completed by Peter Billam for flute and keyboard, also in C major for alto recorder, and in G major for descant; *Ricercare a 3*, from the *Musikalisches Opfer* for keyboard; *Ricercare a 6*, for sSATBG recorders, or strings, or two keyboards; *Fuga Canonica in Epidiapente* for keyboard and melody instrument; from the *Art of Fugue: Contrapuncti 1* and *4* for keyboard, and *Contrapunctus 14* as completed by D. F. Tovey, for keyboard, or for SATB recorders, or for strings; *Passacaglia and Fugue in c* for piano four hands; *Chorales with Descant* for melody instrument and piano; *Cello Suites I, II* and *III* for flute or alto recorder, *Forty Chorales* for piano, *Der Geist hilft* for SATB-SATB recorders. By Johannes Brahms: *Fugue in Ab minor for organ*, for SATB recorders and gamba, in A minor; *Choralvorspiele for organ* with previous settings by Isaac, Bach, Praetorius, recorders. By Franz Schubert: *Four Songs*, voice and guitar; *Schubert Dances*, recorders and guitar, *Schubert Dances*, piano 4 hands. By G. F. Händel: *Concerto Grosso in A minor op 6 no 4*, harpsichord and recorders; *Recorder Sonata in Bb no 5*, in G for tenor recorder and keyboard. By other composers: *Claudio Monteverdi, Ecco Mormorar l'Onde*, SSATB recorders; *Twelve Italian Songs*, voice and guitar; *John Wilbye, Draw on sweet Night*, SSATTB recorders, and for flute choir; *Telemann, Twelve Flute Fantasias*, recorder; *John Carr, Divisions on an Italian Ground*, flute or recorder and guitar; *Fourteen Folk Dance Tunes*, recorder and guitar; *Easy Classical Pieces*, Bb trumpet and piano.

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