



# **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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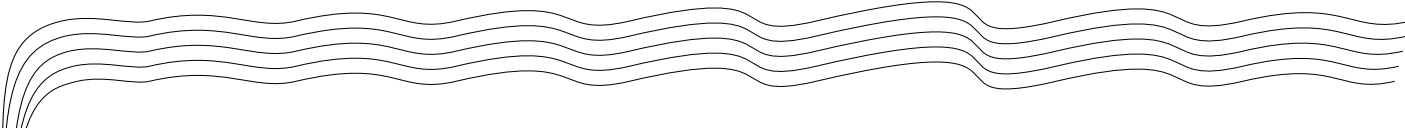
## Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit

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 Hülff 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 and 3/4 time. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes and chords.

Measures 5-8. Measure 5 is marked with a '5' above the treble clef. The right hand continues with a melodic line, and the left hand features a more active accompaniment with sixteenth notes and chords.

Measures 9-12. Measure 9 is marked with a 'tr 10' above the treble clef. The right hand has a melodic line with a trill in measure 10. The left hand continues with a rhythmic accompaniment.

Measures 13-16. Measure 15 is marked with a '15' above the treble clef. The right hand has a melodic line with a trill in measure 15. The left hand continues with a rhythmic accompaniment.

Measures 17-20. The right hand has a melodic line with a trill in measure 17. The left hand continues with a rhythmic accompaniment.

Measures 21-24. Measure 21 is marked with a '20' above the treble clef. The right hand has a melodic line with a trill in measure 21. The left hand continues with a rhythmic accompaniment.

25

30

35

40

45

The musical score is presented in a system of six staves, each containing a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 25, 30, 35, 40, and 45 clearly marked. The notation includes various rhythmic values, slurs, ties, and ornaments, particularly in the later measures. The bass line often features a steady eighth-note accompaniment, while the treble line has more melodic and rhythmic complexity.

**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](http://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. *Wwww.pjb.com.au* offers a new approach to music publishing. These pieces are **written to be read, made to be played !**

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**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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