



Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe

the one-hundred-and-fifty-sixth cantata by

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Bram Wayman, conductor

performed as part of the series
Bach's Lunch

Friday, September 25th, 2015
Grant Hall, room 122



—✧ The performers ✧—

Voices

Sophia Zey
SOPRANO

Anna Hoard
ALTO

Christopher Puckett
TENOR

Armando Contreras
BASS

Oboe

Jessica Cary

Violin

Shupeí Wang
CONCERTMASTER

Herin Cho

Viola

Hui-Yi Kao

Violoncello

Ezgi Karakus

Organ

Dr. Elisa Bickers

Conducted by

Bram Wayman

—✧ About Bach's cantatas ✧—

In general, a *cantata* is a set of movements that, together, tell a story. Unlike musicals or oratorios, where the story is contained entirely within the characters' world, cantatas include exposition and reflection from the storytellers' point of view.

The cantata has its roots in the early Baroque period in Italy, where it developed alongside other new dramatic forms. Early cantatas were mostly secular. It was in the hands of German Lutherans that the cantata became a primarily sacred form — and in the hands of one composer in particular.

Johann Sebastian Bach wrote some three hundred cantatas, about two hundred of which survive today. He composed most of them for the Church of St. Thomas, at which he began directing music in 1723. Each and every week, Bach composed a new cantata on the weekly Bible readings. They functioned something like a musical sermon: an artistic response to a pastor's discussion, and a personalized, expressive, and often dramatized approach to the scripture and lessons of the day.

Bach's cantatas involve many typical forms of the time: *arias* (solo songs expressing a personal viewpoint), *recitatives* (essentially musical speech that is

narrative or didactic), *choruses* and *chorales* (movements for multiple voices, often based on a hymn tune, or “chorale”), and occasionally *sinfonias* (introductory movements for orchestra).

—❖ *About Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe* ❖—

Musical entertainment on a grand scale marked the transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque. Solo singing against chordal accompaniment, a form called *monody*, defined the era in dramatic terms, and opera, the cutting-edge of theatre, was a new spectacle for a new age. Carissimi, Scarlatti, and Handel dominated the scene. The high church style that had governed even the composition of madrigals gave way, and in its stead, the theatrical style — freely recited passages, soaring arias, and grand overtures — became the norm not only on the stage but in the chapel as well.

Amid this sea change, Johann Sebastian Bach created music that sits squarely between these two worlds, influenced by dramatic methods but ultimately sacred in intent as well as in content. Bach’s works are didactic: created to teach more than to entertain. To this end, he adapted dramatic devices so they include the listener in the drama of the story. Arias become personal reflections; recits are spoken, not from the point of view of a theatrical character, but from that of an everyday congregant. Bach’s most well-known examples of this inclusive approach occur in his oratorios, where chorales, hymns his congregation would know, punctuate a church story. But rarely is this overall approach more viscerally successful than in his cantata *Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe*.

Ich steh was composed for the third Sunday after Epiphany, the twenty-third of January, 1729. The reading for that day in Bach’s church was in two parts: a passage from the book of Romans (12: 17–21), about the triumph of good over evil, and a story of Jesus’ healing of a leper in the gospel of Matthew (8: 1–13). From these two stories, the congregation on that snowy Sunday morning would have felt a powerful draw to the love of their God, and their God’s saving grace, against a world in which cold, disease, and death were always near. The cantata Bach composed for this Sunday is, indeed, a dramatic work, but one in which the narrator constantly changes, reflecting the many-sided nature of personal experience: wordless sadness, thoughtful reflection, moments of intense pain and joy, and, in the end, universal salvation.

A longing solo opens the cantata, as if to recall, one last time, the joyous moments of a life coming to a close. The first narrator of the cantata is not a human voice, but an oboe — for who has the words to tell what it is like to look through the open door of Death?

The second movement begins with unsteady step, a syncopated rhythm like a weak heartbeat accompanying the title line of the cantata: “I stand with one foot in the grave.” The tenor takes up the role of narrator, his music a struggle of failing body and faltering faith, while a hymn tune soars angel-like in the distance, a metric security he cannot grasp. Nearly every line in this movement descends, pointing toward the grave in dark subtle dissonances; even repeated lines often appear successively lower and lower.

The narrator of the cantata switches again in the third movement. Here, the bass speaks in raw angst to God. His pain is reflected in the notes themselves, and even the cello leaps in fits and starts to unexpected, distant tones. Perhaps the most touching line in the cantata is here: “If, God, it is due to my sin that you lay me in my sickbed, I beg you, let your goodness be greater than your justice.”

The fourth movement is a dance, lanced through with alternating moments of light and dark. Even though the second section (“In joy, in suffering...”) is as nimble as the first, it reflects the pain the narrator — now the alto — finds at every step: “In dying, in pleading, and in prayer, let your will always befall me.”

At last, the bass returns, to pick up a thread from his preceding recit. Now, he sings, “If [instead of falling ill,] you grant me health, may it be in spirit as well as in body.” Yet even as his prayer reaches its sweetest moment, terror strikes. Against a devastating harmony, he sings, “You alone are my comfort” — and dies.

The cantata has at last brought us through Death’s door, where all find themselves in a world of comfort and unity. The narrator joins the host of angels, and the final movement, a simple hymn, is sung, not by any lone suffering soul, but by all the performers together. There is no more story; the words, a prayer, only restate the best that we know: “Sustain me in your grace, and give me patience, for your will is the best.”

—✧ Text and translation ✧—

1. Sinfonia (orchestra)

2. Aria and chorale (tenor, soprano)

(Chorale text is shown in italics.)

Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe,
(Machs mit mir, Gott, nach deiner
Güt,)

bald fällt der kranke Leib hinein,
(hilf mir in meinen Leiden,)

komm, lieber Gott, wenn dir's
gefällt,

(was ich dich bitt, versag mir
nicht.)

ich habe schon mein Haus bestellt,
(Wenn sich mein Seel soll
scheiden,

so nimm sie, Herr, in deine Händ:)
nur lass mein Ende selig sein!
(ist alles gut, wenn gut das End.)

*I stand with one foot in the grave;
(Take care of me, God, in your
goodness,)*

*soon my sick body will fall in.
(help me in my suffering.)*

*Come, dear God, when it pleases
you,*

(What I beg of you, deny me not.)

*I have already set my house in order;
(When my soul must depart,*

*then take it, Lord, in your hands:)
only let my end be blessed!
(all is well that ends well.)*

3. Recitative (bass)

Mein Angst und Not,
mein Leben und mein Tod
steht, liebster Gott, in deinen
Händen;

so wirst du auch auf mich
dein gnädig Auge wenden.
Willst du mich meiner Sünden
wegen

ins Krankenbette legen,
mein Gott, so bitt ich dich,
laß deine Güte größer sein als die
Gerechtigkeit;

doch hast du mich darzu versehn,
dass mich mein Leiden soll
verzehren,
ich bin bereit,

*My fear and distress,
my life and my death
are, dearest God, in your hands;*

*therefore, also turn upon me
Your gracious eye.
If you will, due to my sins,*

*lay me in my sick-bed,
my God, then, I beg you,
let your goodness be greater than
your justice.*

*But if you provide
that my suffering should consume
me,
I am ready:*

dein Wille soll an mir geschehn,
verschone nicht und fahre fort,
laß meine Not nicht lange währen;
je länger hier, je später dort.

*may your will be done to me,
spare me not and go forth,
let my distress not last long;
the longer I am here, the later I will
arrive there [in heaven].*

4. Aria (alto)

Herr, was du willst, soll mir
gefallen,
weil doch dein Rat am besten gilt.
In der Freude, in dem Leide,
im Sterben, in Bitten und Flehn
laß mir allemal geschehn,
Herr, wie du willst.

*Lord, let your will be my pleasure,
because your counsel is for the best.
In joy, in suffering,
in dying, in pleading and in prayer
let what happens to me always be,
Lord, as you will.*

5. Recitative (bass)

Und willst du, dass ich nicht soll
kranken,
so werd ich dir von Herzen
danken;
doch aber gib mir auch dabei,
dass auch in meinem frischen
Leibe
die Seele sonder Krankheit sei
und allezeit gesund verbleibe.
Nimm sie durch Geist und Wort in
acht,
denn dieses ist mein Heil,
und wenn mir Leib und Seel
verschmacht,
so bist du, Gott, mein Trost und
meines Herzens Teil!

*And if you will that I should not
sicken,
then I will thank you from my heart,
but then, also give me this besides:
that in my refreshed body
my soul shall be free from sickness
and always remain healthy.
Take care of me through spirit and
word,
for this is my salvation,
and when my body and soul
languish,
then you are, God, my comfort and
my heart's portion!*

6. Chorale (chorus)

Herr, wie du willst, so schicks mit
mir
im Leben und im Sterben;
allein zu dir steht mein Begier,
Herr, lass mich nicht verderben!
Erhalt mich nur in deiner Huld,

*Lord, let your will be done with me
in life and in dying.
Alone towards you is my desire:
Lord, let me not come to ruin!
Sustain me only in your grace,*

sonst wie du willst, gib mir Geduld,
dein Will, der ist der beste.

*otherwise, as you will, give me
patience,
for your will is the best.*



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—✧ Upcoming choral performances at UMKC ✧—

Join us for more marvelous music in the Bach's Lunch series and beyond this season!

- ◆ October 18th: Conservatory Singers — fall concert
Rolling Hills Presbyterian Church, 3:30 PM
- ◆ October 25th: Faith, Hope, and Love
A benefit performance for the Susan G. Komen Foundation
Country Club Christian Church, 3:30 PM
- ◆ October 30th: *Gott ist unsre Zuversicht* (BWV 197)
Michael Patch, conductor
Bach's Lunch: Grant Hall, 12:00 PM
- ◆ November 3rd: George Frideric Handel's *Judas Maccabaeus*
Bram Wayman, conductor
Central United Methodist Church, 7:30 PM
- ◆ November 8th: Canticum Novum — fall concert
John McDonald, conductor
St. Peter's Catholic Church, 3:30 PM
- ◆ December 5th: A Season for Giving
A benefit performance for Harvesters — the Community Food Network
Visitation Catholic Church, 7:30 PM

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Our performance of *Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe* will last about twenty minutes.
Thank you for turning completely off all electronic devices during the performance.

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