Last changed: 11 October 2025.

Ch (A Cantata of Penitence (Only Cantata for Solo Tenor).

Form: Aria (T) - Recit (T) - Aria (T) - Recit (T) - Chorale (SATB)

See side note for passage from Alfred Dürr's book on the Bach cantatas. There are only 12 extant church cantatas for solo voice (Soprano: 51, 52, 84, 199; Alto: 35, 54, 169,

170, 200; Tenor: 55; Bass: 56, 82). Bach probably chose the tenor voice for Cantata 55 because the

day's Gospel reading relates the story of Peter asking Jesus how many times he must forgive his

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NBA I/26; BC A157

22. S. after Trinity (BWV 89, 115, 55)

has been associated with the

figure in the day's Gospel

in the Passion account. The vocal range is very high, intensifying the overall effect.

Oboe/Oboe d'amore (see note

Instrumentation:

Flauto traverso

VIn I, II Vla **SATB** Continuo

\*Phillipians 1:3-11 (Paul's prayer for the church at Philippi)

brother, whereupon Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant who had been forgiven much. \*Matthew 18:23-35 (The parable of the unforgiving servant) Librettist: Unknown; Presumably Christoph Birkmann (see note).

FP: 17 November 1726 (St. Thomas) from Cycle III (see note). Regarding the origins of the work, see note.

Fl. trav.

Ob. d'amore Viol. I/II

Continuo

Martin Petzoldt outlines the cantata's symmetrical structure ("Bach-Kommentar" 1:628):

3. T. Aria. Repentence makes one call for mercy.
2. T. Recit. Flight from God 4. T. Recit. Turning to God 4. T. Recit. Turning to God

J.S. Bach 1. T. Aria. God is just, I am unjust. 5. Chorale. God's grace is greater than my sin.

The libretto is in the first person throughout, making the cantata individualistic and personal. It 55/1. • Fear of judgment: I recognize my sin (55/1). voice of Peter, who is a central 1. (Aria) reading and who "wept bitterly" in repentance after denying Jesus

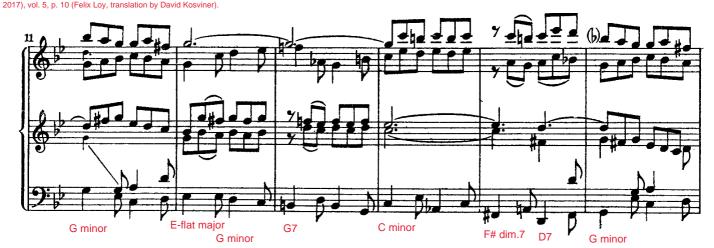
Cantata No. 55 "In the opening aria, obbligato flute and oboe d'amore play together as a pair with frequent parallel thirds and sixths, as do the first and second violins. Together with the continuo, a five-part texture thus emerges, which is expanded to six parts upon the entry of the tenor voice. The polyphonic web of parts, in conjunction with a preference arms. Ich armer Mensch, ich Sündenknecht for treble pitch (there is no viola part) and the exposed high testing the tenor part, not only results in an extraordinarily rich texture, it also conjures up an impression of the writhing sinner who in vain revolts against his burden of sin, since he is unable to free himself from



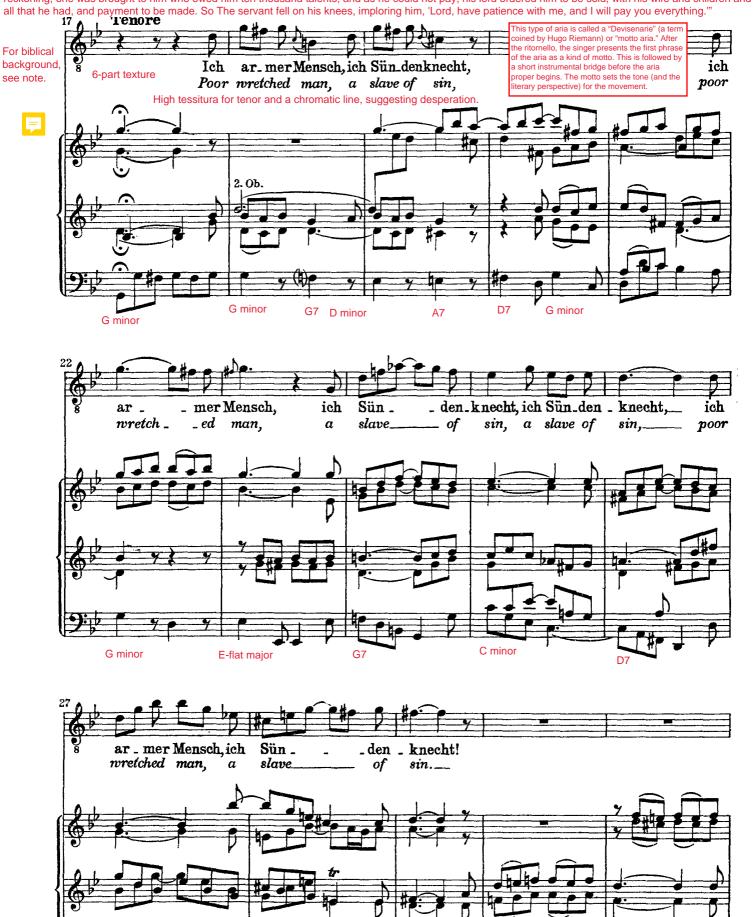
The throbbing/undulating rhythm in compound meter and minor mode is reminiscent of the opening of the St. Matthew Passion, portraying an attitude of lament. "The refrains within the text made it possible to conflate elements of da capo form with rounded binary form." (David Schulenberg in "Oxford Composer Companions. J. S. Bach, 225). The rising lines suggest increasing anxiety, perhaps also "heaped up sins" (see side note for possible biblical allusion)



In the introduction to the Carus edition of BWV 55, Felix Loy, with translation by David Kosviner) writes, "In the first movement, right away the four instrumental parts in the same high register (without viola) are combined with the, at times, extremely high range of the tenor voice to create a dense musical texture which, reinforced by frequent chromaticism, depicts with equal vividness the 'tangle of sins' and the fervid, albeit ineffective attempts of the sinner to escape them." See Johann Sebastian Bach. The Sacred Vocal Music Complete Edition. Cantatas and Motets (Stuttgart: Carus Verlag,



Allusion to Jesus words in John 8:34: "...Every one who commits sin is a slave to sin (Luther 1545: der sünden Knecht)." Indirect allusion also to the day's Gospel reading, Matthew 18:23–26: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So The servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."



B-flat major

(For the significance of D minor, see side note.)

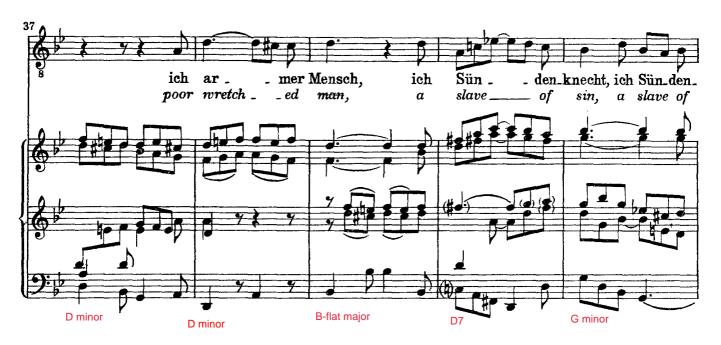
D minor

E-flat major

C# dim.7

G minor





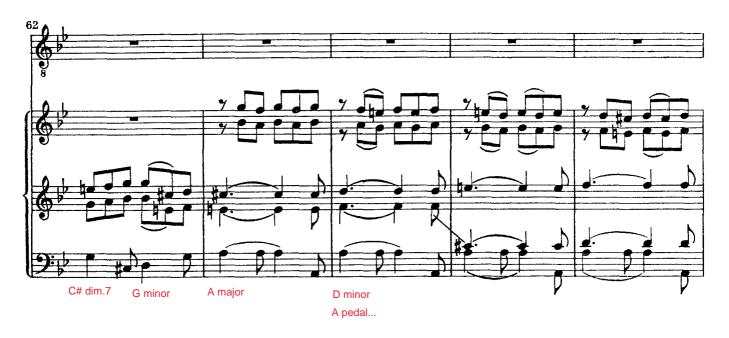




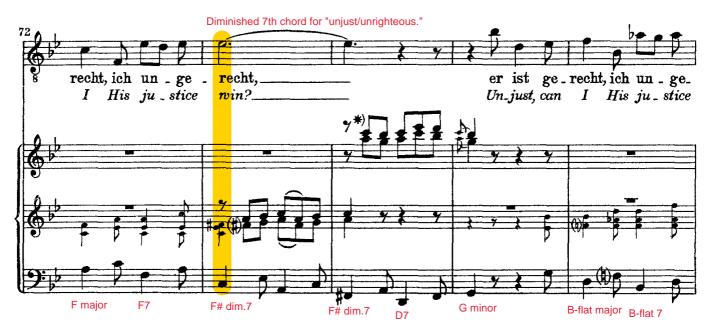






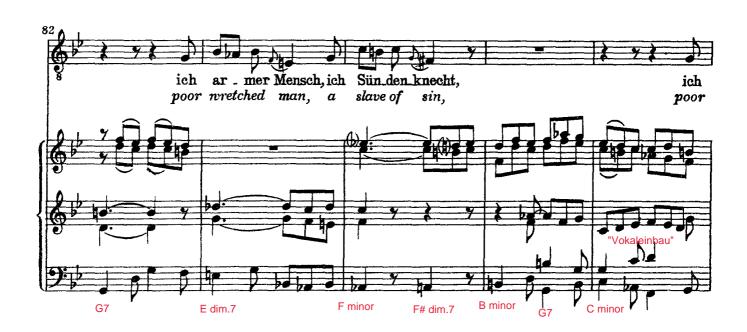


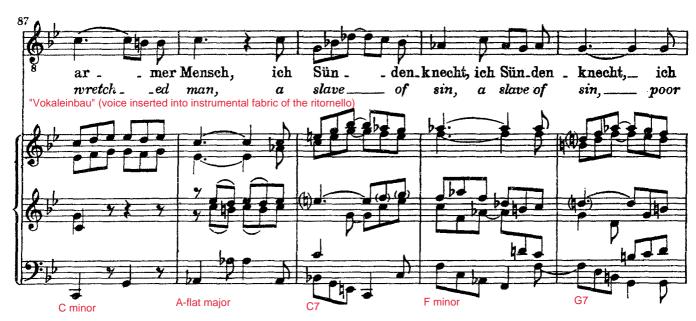


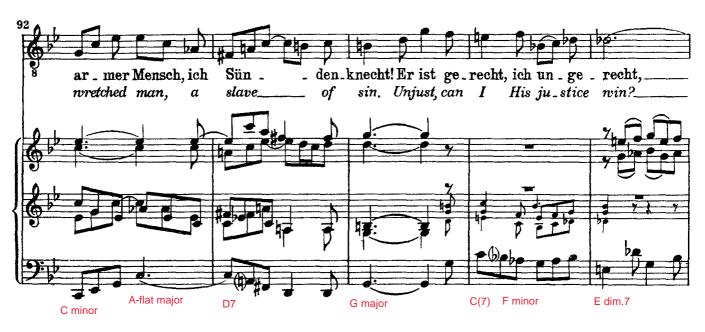


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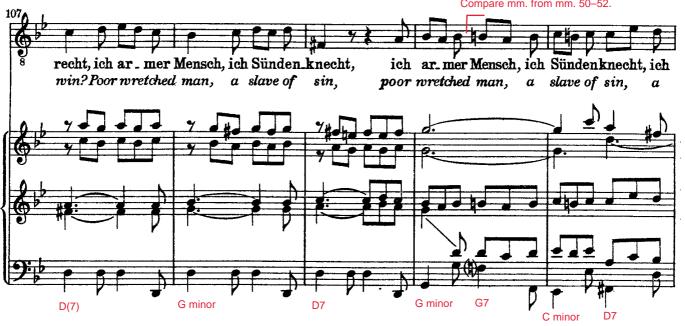




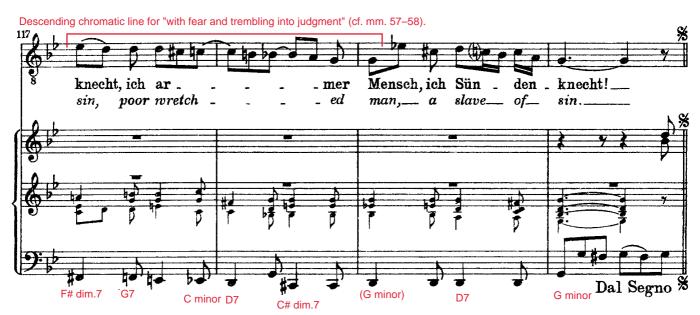




Text painting: Chromaticism from previous phrase on "Zittern" (trembling) reappears on the opening text. Compare mm. from mm. 50–52.





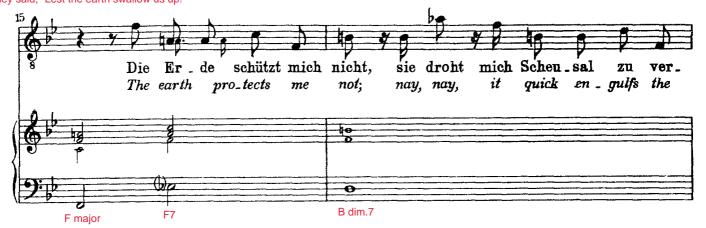


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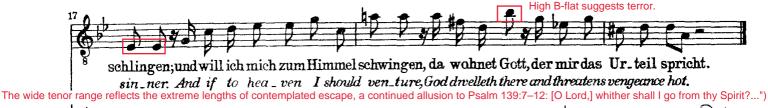




Apparent allusion to Numbers 16:31-34: As [Moses] finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split asunder; and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men that belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol (Luther 1545: Hölle); and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. And all Israel that were round about them fled at their cry; for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up!"



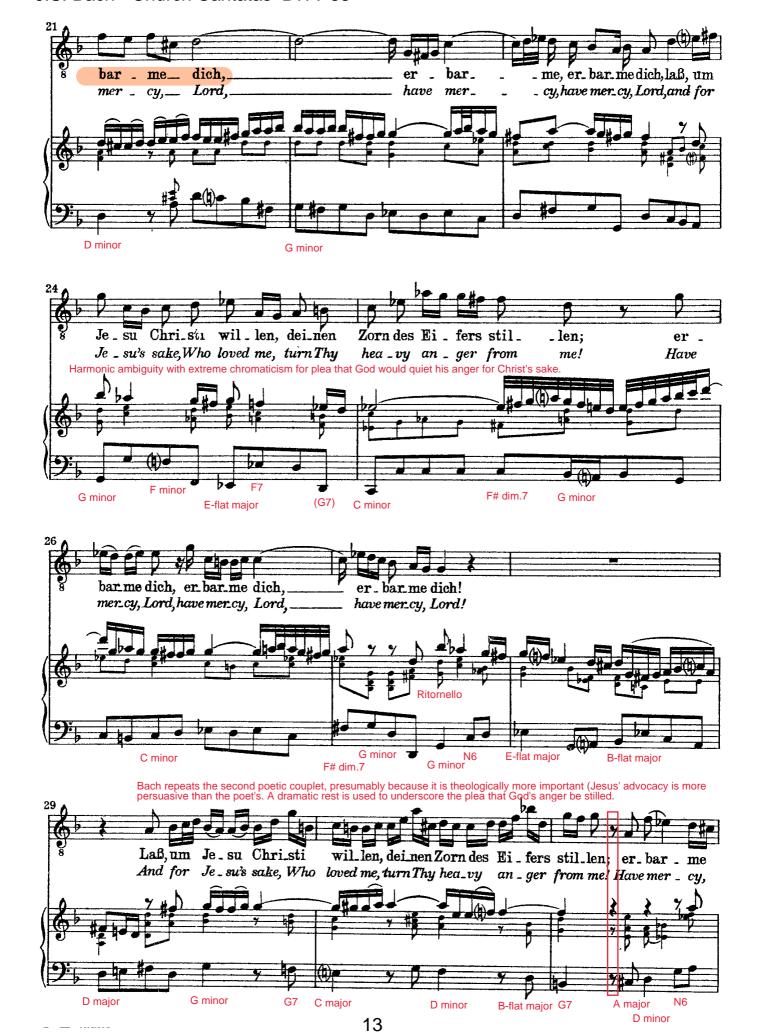
Apparent allusion to Deuteronomy 28:15, 37: If you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you...And you shall become a horror (Luther 1545: Scheusal), a proverb, and a byword, among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you away.

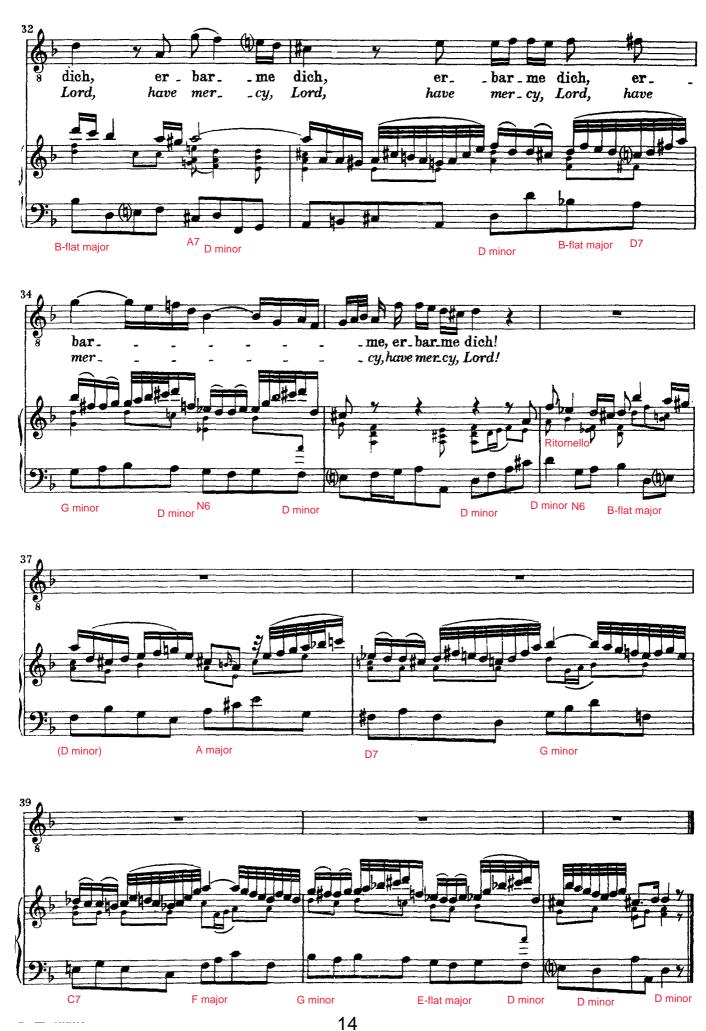




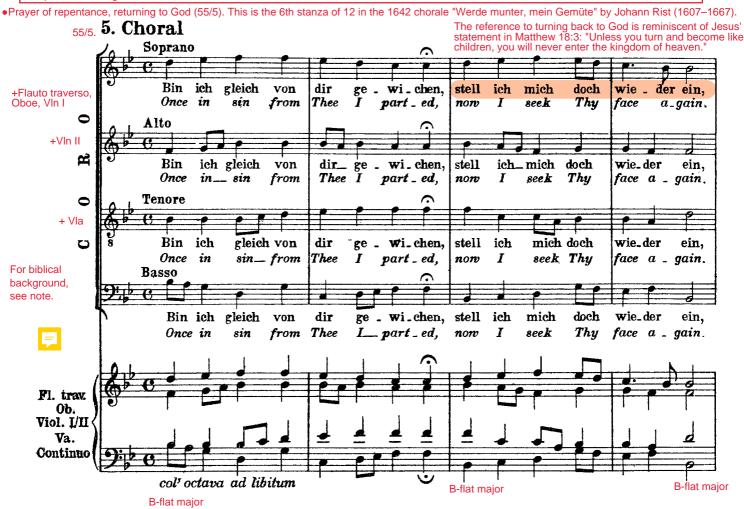
"Here...we find the gesture of beseeching, which is musically represented by a rising leap of a sixth and then a falling step of a second, by expressive, virtuoso flute passage-work, and by the frequent use of the Neapolitan-sixth chord." (Dürr/Jones, The Cantatas of J. S. Bach, 619. •Prayer: Have mercy on me, a sinner, for Jesus' sake (55/3). This movement may have originated earlier—the manuscript score shows it to have been entered as a fair copy. 3. Aria Flauto traverso Form (Each vocal section begins & ends with "Erbarme dich. Fide with Ename didf, followed by a poetic couplet): Rit. (Mm. 1-6)
Lines 1-3 (7-14)
Rit. (15-20)
Lines 4-6 (21-27) rom vocal opening A7 Rit. (27-28) Lines 4-6 (29-35) Rit. (36-41) D minor (for significance of D minor, see note at movement 1). (D7) The call for mercy, "Erbarme dich" (with which the both sections of the aria begin, as well as the text of the following recitative) presumably alludes to the Gospel reading of the day, Matthew 18:26: "The servant fell on his knees, imploring [his master], "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." Alfred Dürr Tenore refers to the "ever-changing melodic garb of the words 'Erbarme dich,' [extending] into the following movement." (Dürr/Jones, 619). elix Loy, with translation by David Kosviner) writes, "The second aria is characterized by the exclamatio figure, an ascending minor sixth symbolizing a ervent entreaty for mercy. The extremely virtuosic and expressive flute part lends heightened intensity to this entreaty." See Johann Sebastian Bach. The Sacred Vocal Music Complete Edition. Cantatas and Motets (Stuttgart: Carus Verlag, 2017), vol. 5, p. 10 (Felix Loy, translation by David Kosviner). Er. Have D minor N6 (E-flat major) For biblical D minor D minor A7 D minor background, Exclamatio see note. bar.me dich, er \_ bar\_ - me dich, bar er cy, Lord! Have mer.cy Lord, Have mer\_ mer N6 B-flat major (D minor) D minor A7 B-flat major N<sub>6</sub> me, er bar \_ me dich, laß die Trä \_ nen dich er \_wei \_ \_chen, laß sie cy, have mer. \_ cy! Look with ty on my cry\_ let Thy \_ ing, G minor D major D7 A major G minor 11

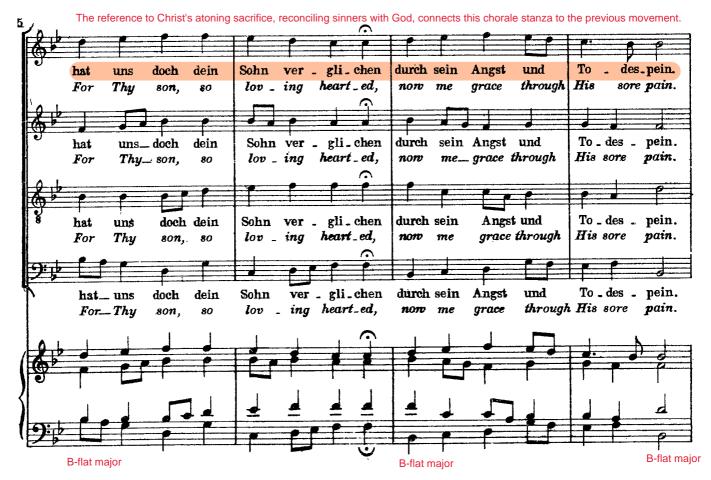




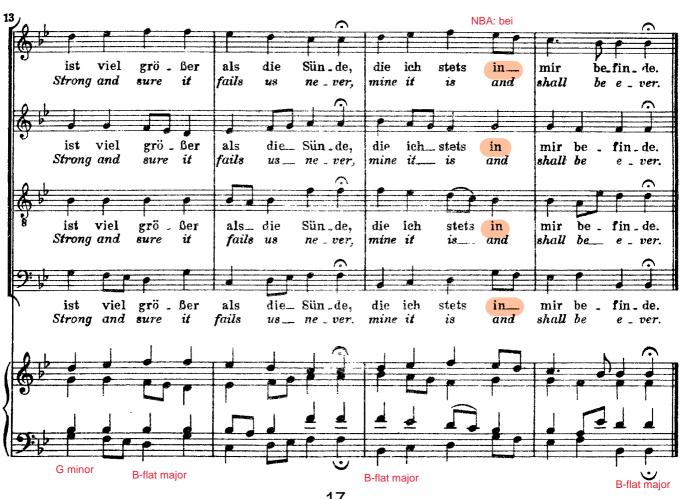


The closing chorale acts as a catechismal response by the congregation. The simplicity of its setting suggests a child-like faith and assurance. Compare the setting of this same stanza in the St. Matthew Passion.









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