

Bach Cantatas at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois

Carl Schalk

Editor's note: Carl Schalk served as assistant to the director of music at Grace Lutheran Church from 1968 to 1997. This brief introduction is part of a larger history of the Bach cantata series at Grace Lutheran Church he is currently writing.

THE BACH CANTATA SERIES at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, Illinois, the brainchild of Paul Bouman, director of music at the church from 1953—1983, was inaugurated on October 3, 1971 with Cantata #19, “Es erhub sich em Streit,” celebrating the feast of St. Michael and All Angels.¹ It was the first of eight cantatas sung that year, one each month through May 1972 sung in the context of the order of Vespers or Evening Prayer with an extended prelude of organ or instrumental music. This series is now in its 38th year, the second longest Bach cantata series in the United States of America.²

Originally a joint venture with Concordia College, River Forest, choirs from Grace Church and Concordia College shared responsibility for the cantatas, each group singing four of the eight cantatas in each yearly series. After the first year, both choirs were present at each service, one choir singing the cantata, the other singing a motet in the service. Later in the 1970s the choir of Grace church took over responsibility for the entire series. More recently the Kapelle of Concordia University has appeared as a guest choir singing one cantata in each of the past several years.

Several basic characteristics of the series developed in its early years and have continued to the present. 1) Each service includes a homily based on the lessons for the day or the basic content of the cantata. Homilies are not to be musicological treatises but Gospel proclamation. 2) Cantatas are sung in the original German language, 3) The motet for each service is to be selected generally from the rich repertoire of choral music from the early centuries of Lutheran music. Likewise, the hymns sung are to be chosen largely from the great chorales of the Lutheran church from Luther to Bach. And the pre-service music is chosen largely from the repertoire of J. S. Bach and others of his general period. 4) Equally important, the church choir, which sang regularly each Sunday, is not to curtail its primary responsibility in the Sunday morning service. The Bach cantata series would be above and beyond their regular continued involvement in the regular worship of the congregation.

The beginning of this Bach cantata series was not the first time Bach cantatas had been heard at Grace Church. Paul Bouman's predecessor, Carl Halter, who served Grace Church from 1943–1953, had presented several cantatas on special occasions such as Grace Church's “Days of Spiritual Music,” consisting of special concerts in the Spring of the year. These

included Cantata 6, “Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden,” Cantata 106, “Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit” (*Actus tragicus*), and Cantata 4, “Christ lag in Todesbanden.”

Likewise, Paul Bouman performed several Bach cantatas or cantata choruses on special occasions in his early years at Grace, as he had at St. Paul Lutheran Church, Melrose Park, Illinois, where he held a similar position before coming to Grace Church. These efforts were not always greeted with approval. As one long-time member of Grace Church told Paul Bouman early in his tenure as director of music, “No one at Grace Church will ever thank you for singing Bach!”

By the end of the 1960s the determination grew in Paul Bouman's mind to plan and establish a regular series of Bach cantata performances at Grace Church. The question was “Is the task too great for the church choir and simultaneously continue its regular weekly participation in the Sunday services?” A solution presented itself when the undersigned was asked to direct the Kapelle of Concordia College for the 1971 school year to fill a sabbatical leave for Thomas Gieschen, the regular conductor. It seemed possible that the Grace choir together with the Chapel Choir and the Kapelle from Concordia could share the task. Thus the stage was set for the inauguration of what has become a series lasting over almost four decades.

Following Paul Bouman's retirement his successor, John Folkening, who served Grace Church for seventeen years as director of music and who happened to be present at that first cantata in 1971 as a graduate student in church music at Concordia, River Forest, continued the tradition. It continues today under the direction of Michael D. Costello, the present cantor.

Born in the often turbulent years of the 1970s when church music was undergoing significant change, not always for the better, this cantata series, over the years, has drawn a large and appreciative attendance. It has attracted many people from outside the congregation as well as congregation members, and has been increasingly seen by the congregation as an important part of its program and as a means of outreach to the local community as well as the greater Lutheran community of greater Chicago. It has also become clear over the years that many who attend do so because they find in the combination of a rich liturgy, a devotional atmosphere, and significant preaching together with inspiring music an experience often missing in their local churches.

As this continuing Bach cantata series approaches its fortieth year it is clear that it has been a rich blessing not only to Grace congregation but to the wider community and to the church at large.

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¹ For the record, the pre-service organ recitalist was Carl Waldschmidt of Concordia College, soloists were Rhoda Neukukatz, soprano, Omer Reese, tenor, and Joseph McCall, bass. Carl Schalk conducted and Richard R. Caemmerer of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, was the homilist.

² The longest series is that of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, New York City, now in its 41st season.