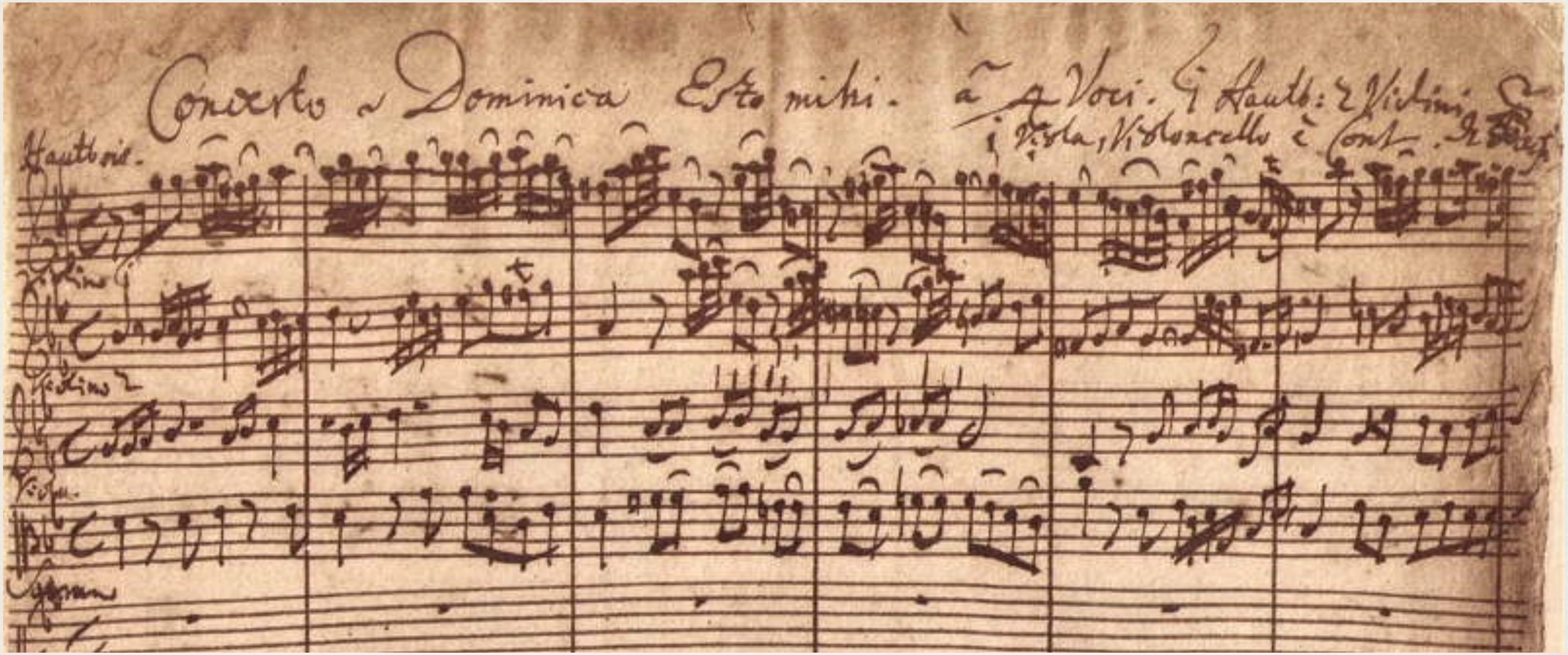
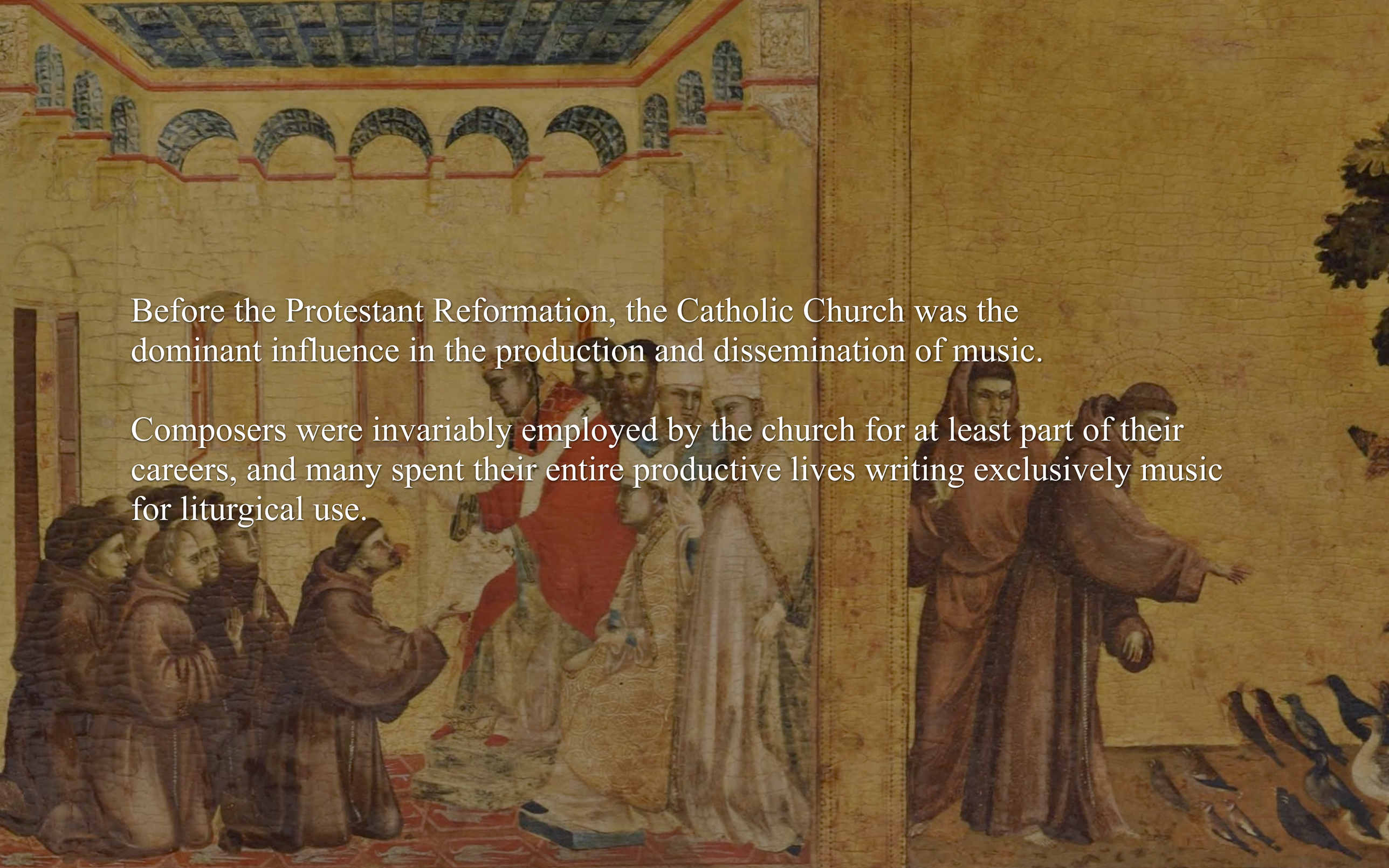


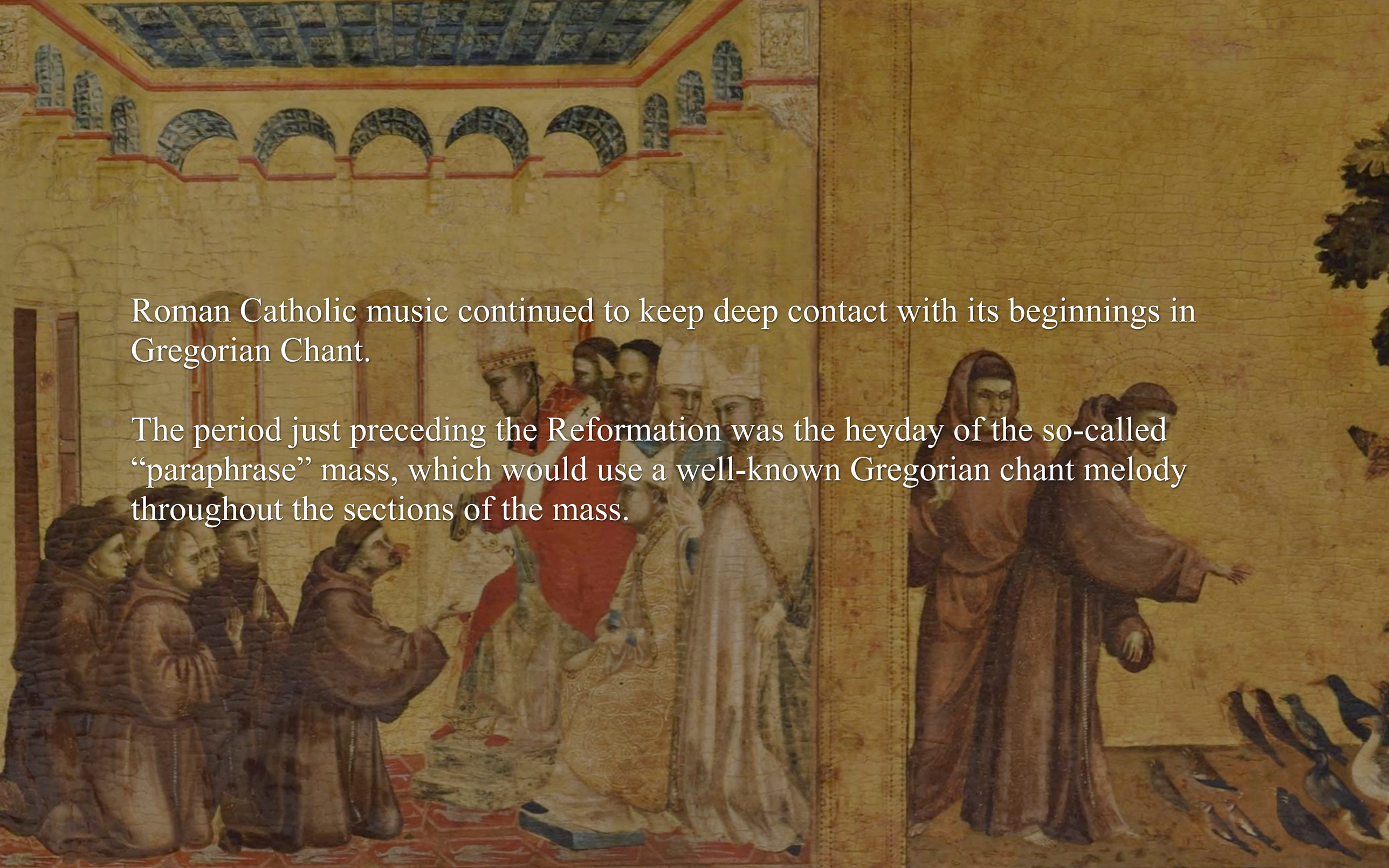
Music as Mirror

1 - Bach's Cantata 140 and the German Reformation



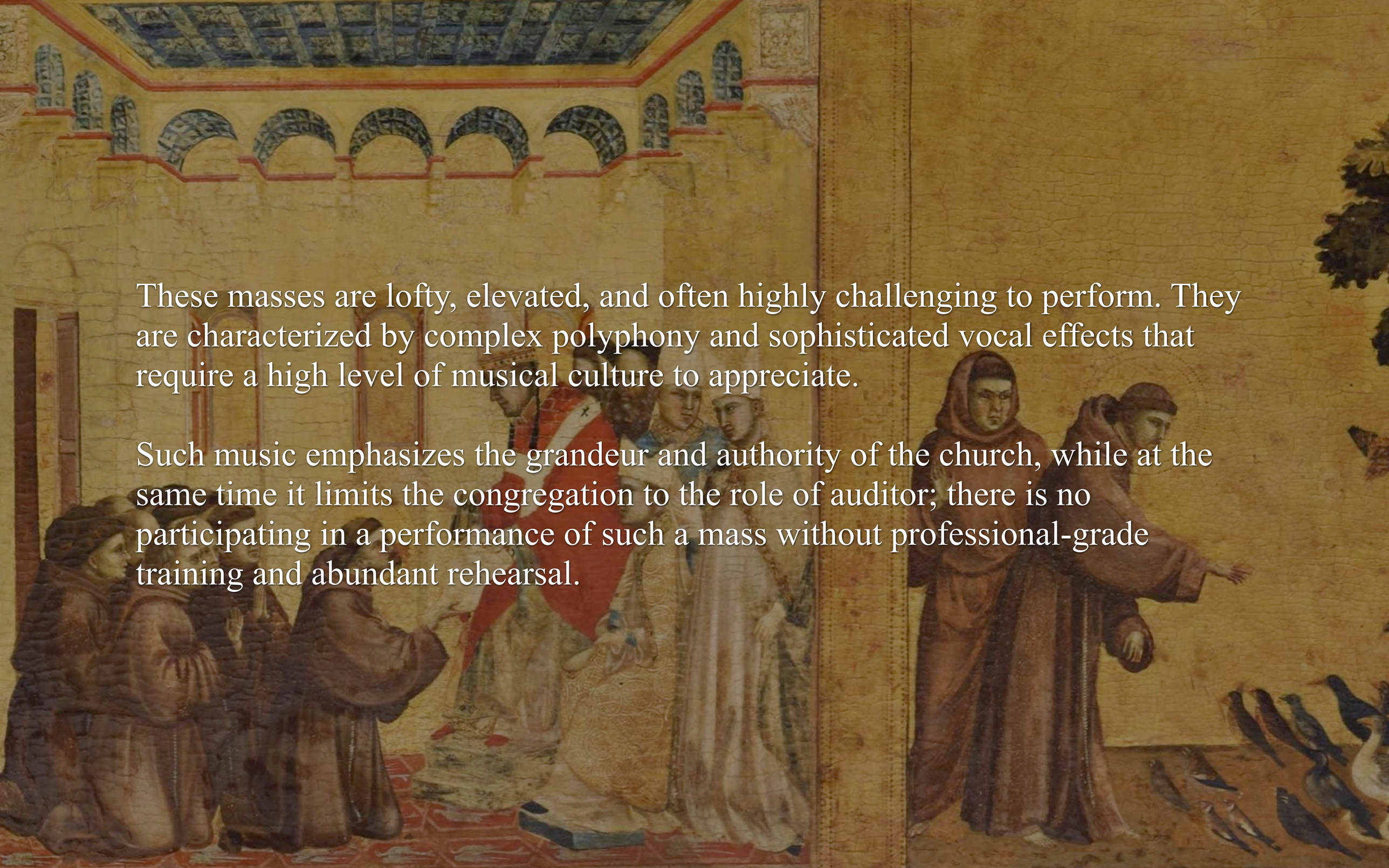
Before the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church was the dominant influence in the production and dissemination of music.

Composers were invariably employed by the church for at least part of their careers, and many spent their entire productive lives writing exclusively music for liturgical use.



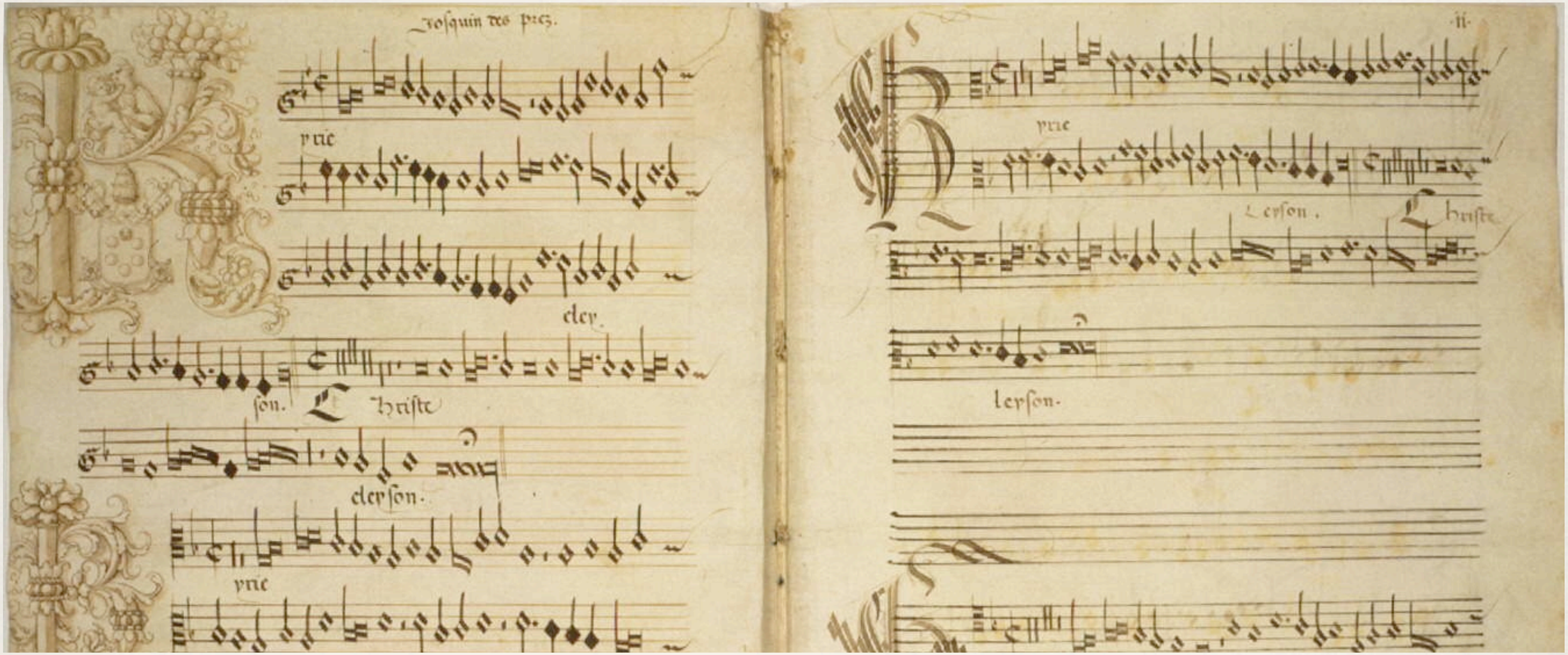
Roman Catholic music continued to keep deep contact with its beginnings in Gregorian Chant.

The period just preceding the Reformation was the heyday of the so-called “paraphrase” mass, which would use a well-known Gregorian chant melody throughout the sections of the mass.



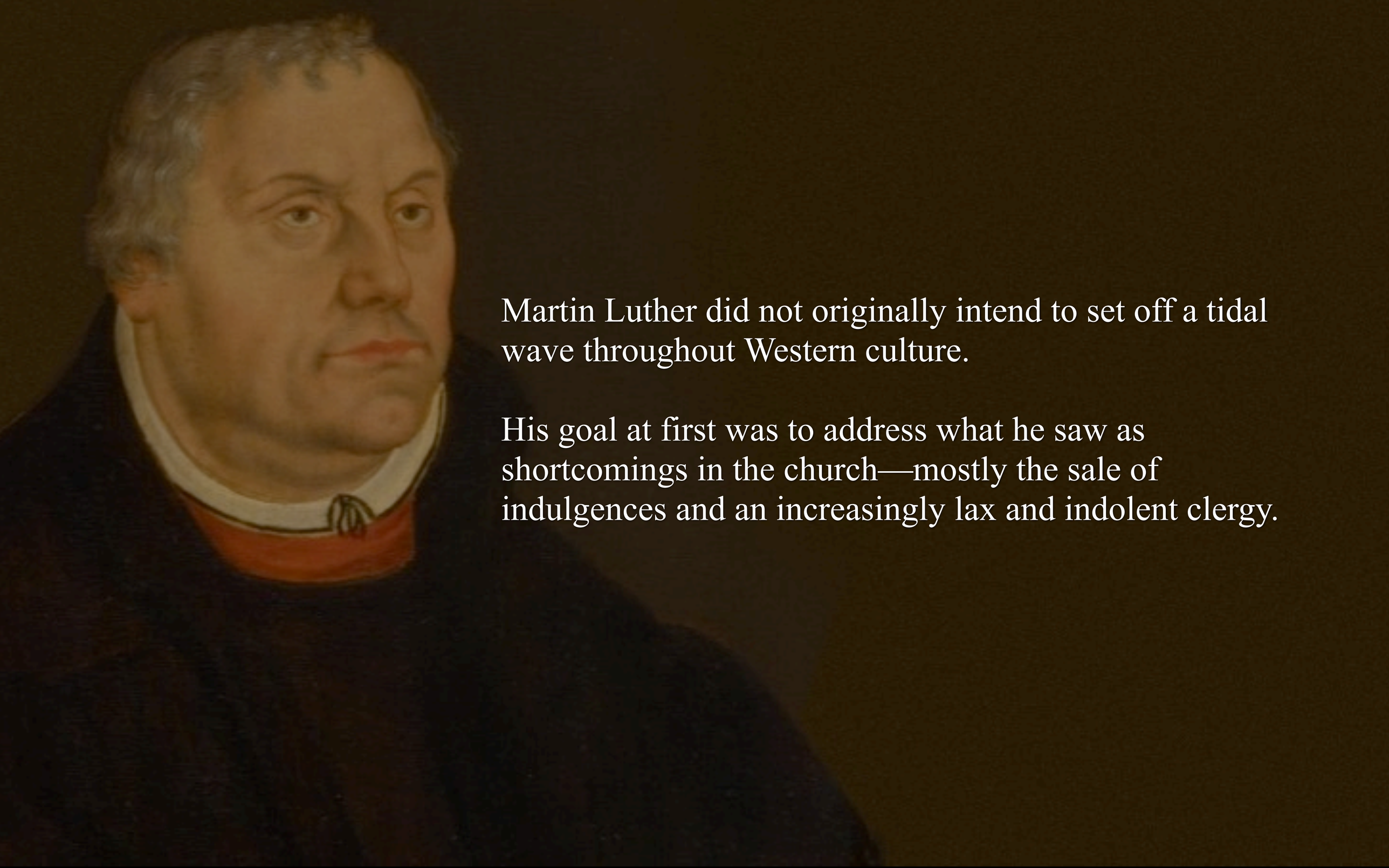
These masses are lofty, elevated, and often highly challenging to perform. They are characterized by complex polyphony and sophisticated vocal effects that require a high level of musical culture to appreciate.

Such music emphasizes the grandeur and authority of the church, while at the same time it limits the congregation to the role of auditor; there is no participating in a performance of such a mass without professional-grade training and abundant rehearsal.



Josquin Des Prez: Missa Pange lingua - Kyrie

The Tallis Scholars



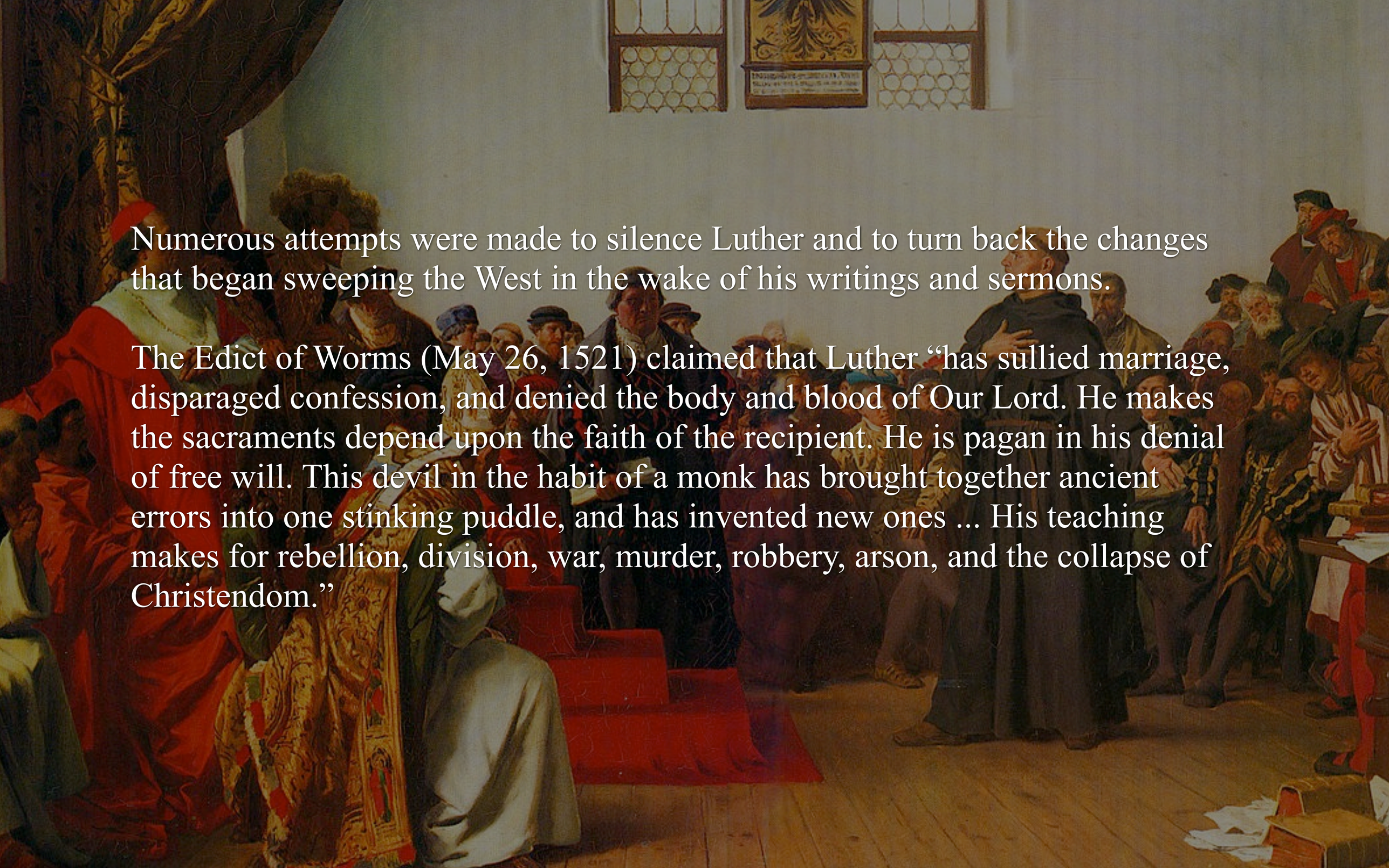
Martin Luther did not originally intend to set off a tidal wave throughout Western culture.

His goal at first was to address what he saw as shortcomings in the church—mostly the sale of indulgences and an increasingly lax and indolent clergy.

When the miner's son from Saxony, Luther, posted his 95 propositions on the door of All Saints' church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, the last thing he wanted to do was to break up his church, the Catholic (= "universal"), and divide his world into warring camps.

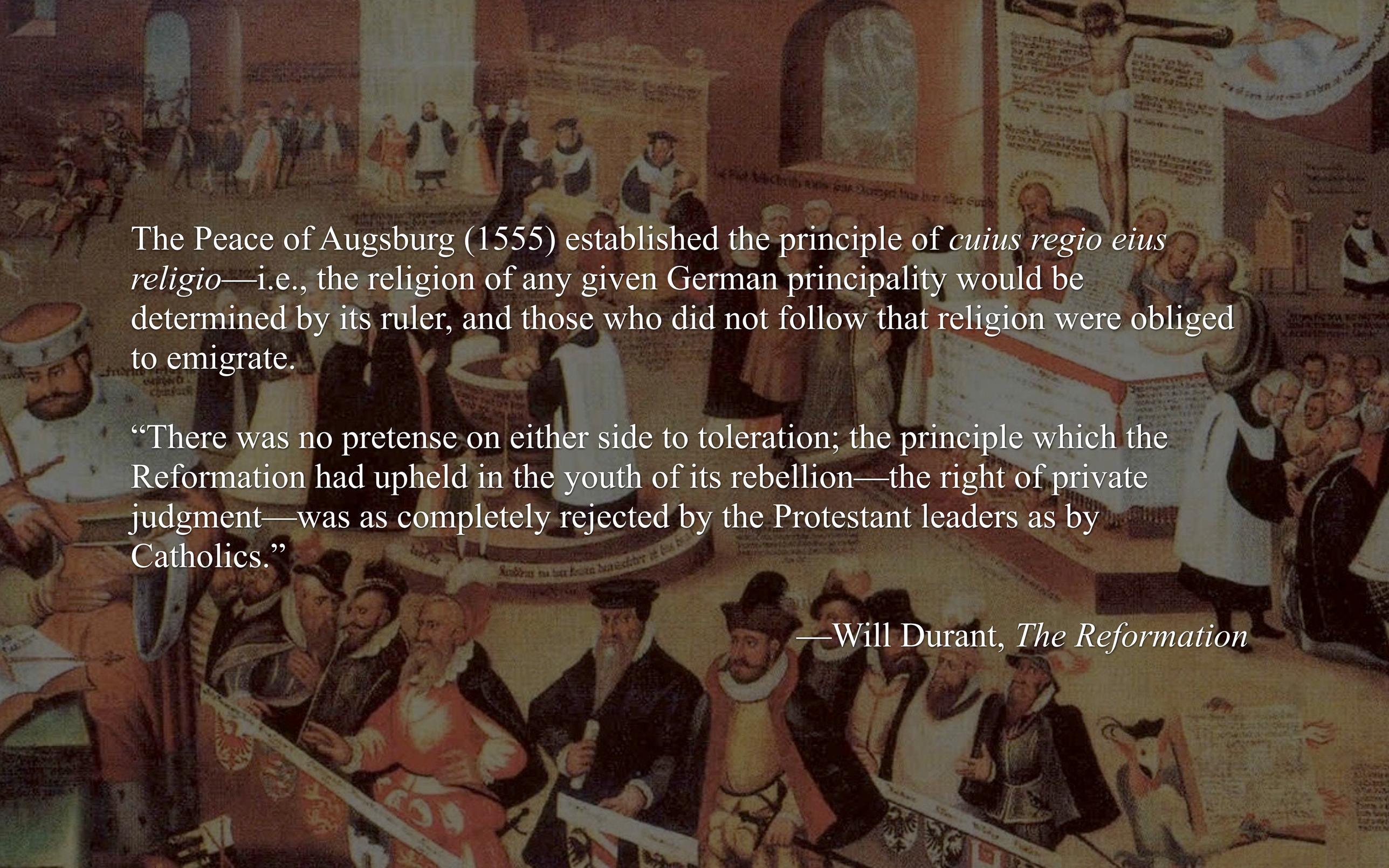
Nor was he performing an unusual act. He was a monk and professor of theology at the newly founded university of Wittenberg (where Hamlet later studied), and it was common practice for clerics to start a debate in this fashion. The equivalent today would be to publish a provocative article in a learned journal.

Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence*



Numerous attempts were made to silence Luther and to turn back the changes that began sweeping the West in the wake of his writings and sermons.

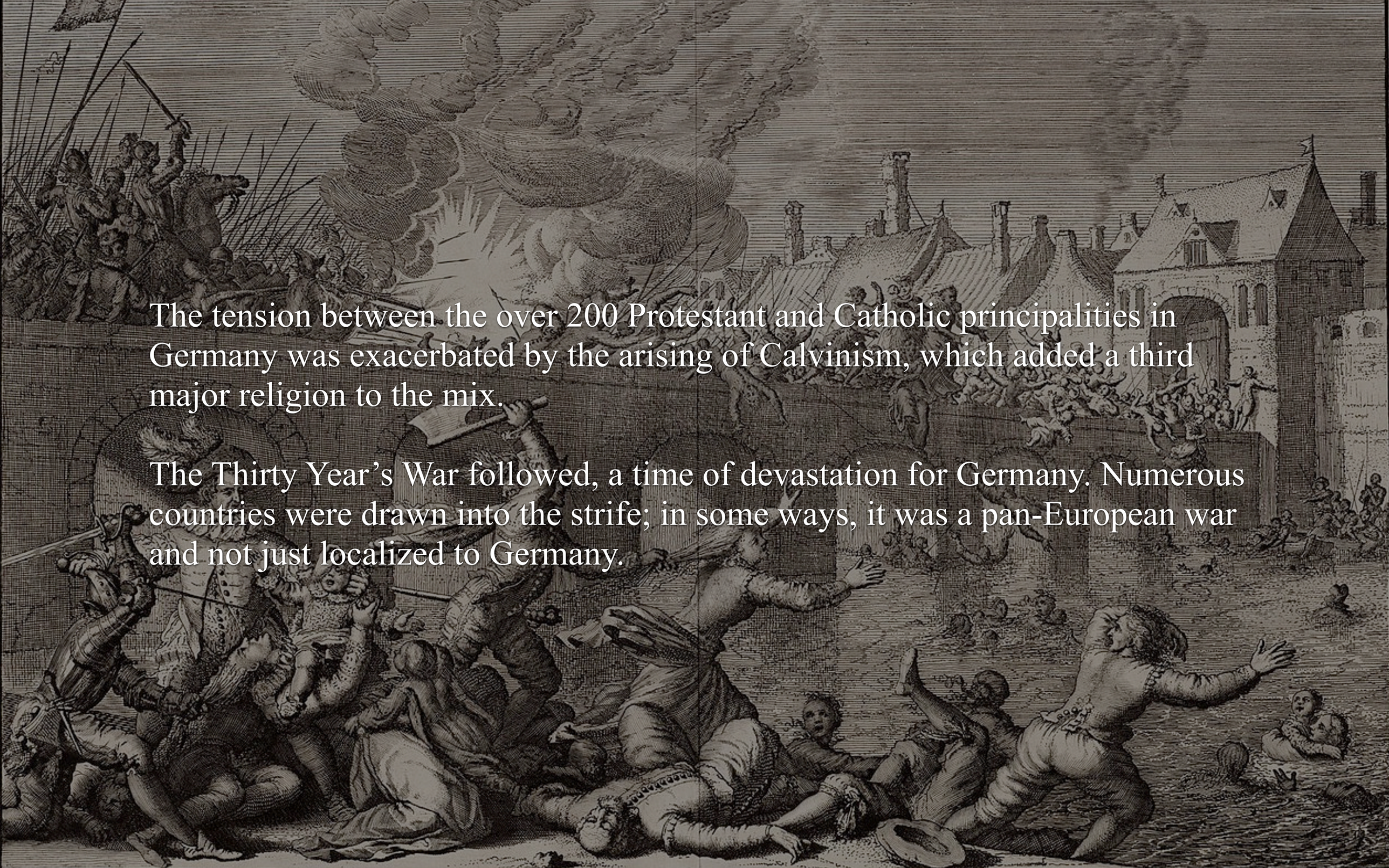
The Edict of Worms (May 26, 1521) claimed that Luther "has sullied marriage, disparaged confession, and denied the body and blood of Our Lord. He makes the sacraments depend upon the faith of the recipient. He is pagan in his denial of free will. This devil in the habit of a monk has brought together ancient errors into one stinking puddle, and has invented new ones ... His teaching makes for rebellion, division, war, murder, robbery, arson, and the collapse of Christendom."



The Peace of Augsburg (1555) established the principle of *cuius regio eius religio*—i.e., the religion of any given German principality would be determined by its ruler, and those who did not follow that religion were obliged to emigrate.

"There was no pretense on either side to toleration; the principle which the Reformation had upheld in the youth of its rebellion—the right of private judgment—was as completely rejected by the Protestant leaders as by Catholics."

—Will Durant, *The Reformation*

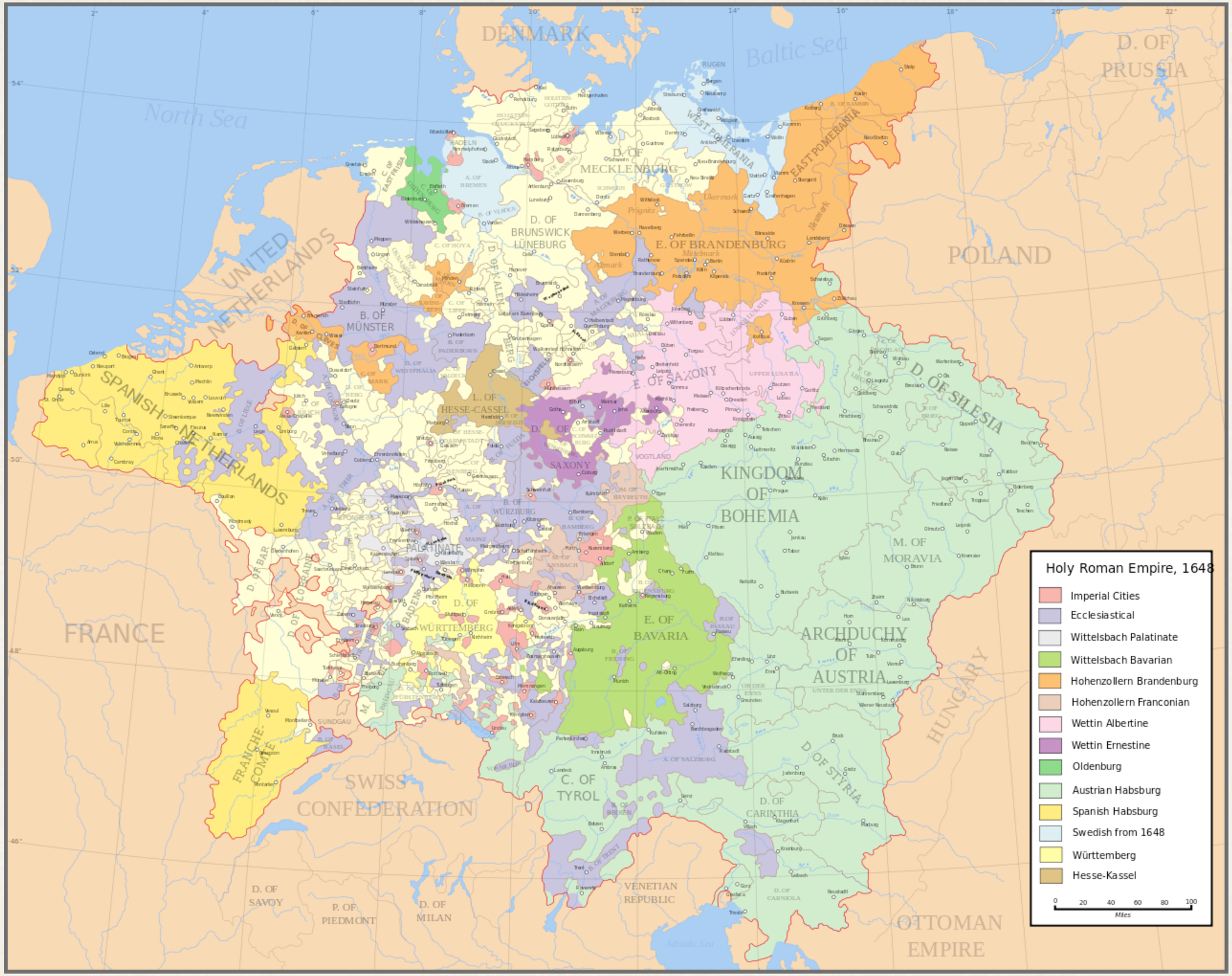


The tension between the over 200 Protestant and Catholic principalities in Germany was exacerbated by the arising of Calvinism, which added a third major religion to the mix.

The Thirty Year's War followed, a time of devastation for Germany. Numerous countries were drawn into the strife; in some ways, it was a pan-European war and not just localized to Germany.

The War ended in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

At the end of the war, Germany was a patchwork quilt of independent states—a situation that was to last throughout Bach's lifetime.


Holy Roman Empire, 1648
Imperial Cities
Ecclesiastical
Wittelsbach Palatinate
Wittelsbach Bavarian
Hohenzollern Brandenburg
Hohenzollern Franconian
Wettin Albertine
Wettin Ernestine
Oldenburg
Austrian Habsburg
Spanish Habsburg
Swedish from 1648
Württemberg
Hesse-Kassel
0 20 40 60 80 100
Miles
DENMARK
Baltic Sea
North Sea
D. OF PRUSSIA
POLAND
UNITED NETHERLANDS
SPANISH NETHERLANDS
FRANCE
SWISS CONFEDERATION
KINGDOM OF BOHEMIA
ARCHDUCHY OF AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
OTTOMAN EMPIRE
VENETIAN REPUBLIC
D. OF MECKLENBURG
D. OF BRUNSWICK LÜNEBURG
E. OF BRANDENBURG
B. OF MÜNSTER
E. OF SAXONY
L. OF HESSE-CASSEL
D. OF SAXONY
D. OF SILESIA
M. OF MORAVIA
E. OF BAVARIA
D. OF WÜRTTEMBERG
C. OF TYROL
D. OF STIRIA
D. OF CARINTHIA
D. OF SAVOY
P. OF PIEDMONT
D. OF MILAN
FRANCHE-COMÉ
WEST POMERANIA
EAST POMERANIA

The Lutheran Cantata Takes Shape

"At the heart of the Protestant service lies the sermon. Here, according to Luther, the proclamation of God's Word becomes a reality. The history of church music from Schütz to Bach is thus an account of the influx into liturgical singing of sermon-like interpretative and exegetical elements."

—Alfred Dürr, *The Bach Cantatas*

Up to the Reformation, the Ordinary of the Mass had for centuries stimulated composers to ever-new settings. But now Bible readings came to the fore: sometimes the Epistle, but more often the Gospel, which had long been prescribed for clerics as the obligatory text of their sermon at the main service. Even in the Lutheran Church these readings were originally chanted by the minister to a prescribed melodic formula known as the lesson tone. But parts of them, particularly the words of Jesus or other aphoristic passages, were now set to music afresh and sung by the choir. Finally, the stage was reached when the choir no longer sang its 'dictum motet' during the reading but afterwards instead. Here we reach the birthplace of a genre that acquired many different names in contemporary terminology, such as *motet, Kirchenstück, Kirchenmusik, Musik, Musikalische Andacht,* and *concerto*. In the end, however, it was called *cantata*, and this name alone has survived for postery as a description of music fulfilling this function.

—Albert Dürr, *The Bach Cantatas*

The Lutheran cantata owes its structure and style largely to Erdmann Neumeister, who established a layout of recitatives, arias, and choruses early in the 1700s. Bach set some of Neumeister's texts, although they are on the whole of poor literary quality.

One hotly-debated but mostly welcome influence was Italian music, particularly opera-like elements. In the fully-matured cantata, as we hear from Bach from 1723 onwards, almost every form of the era can be found: motets, madrigals, arias, recitatives, chorales, chorale preludes, fugues, and even concerto movements.

Bach's earliest cantatas date from his years in Arnstadt (1703-1707) and Mühlhausen (1708), when Bach was as yet unaware of the Neumeister reforms. Thus they tend to hew closely to 17th-century norms and lack any Italian operatic elements such as recitatives or arias.

BWV 4 *Christ lag in Todesbanden* of about 1707 makes for a fine example of such an early cantata.

BWV 4, written for Easter Sunday, consists of numerous "gapped" settings of Martin Luther's 1524 melody *Christ lag in Todesbanden.*

We'll hear one of the stanzas, in which a tenor sings the chorale melody while a solo violin plays in the "gaps" between the phrases.

J.S. Bach: Cantata BWV 4 *Christ lag in Todesbanden*

Tavener Consort

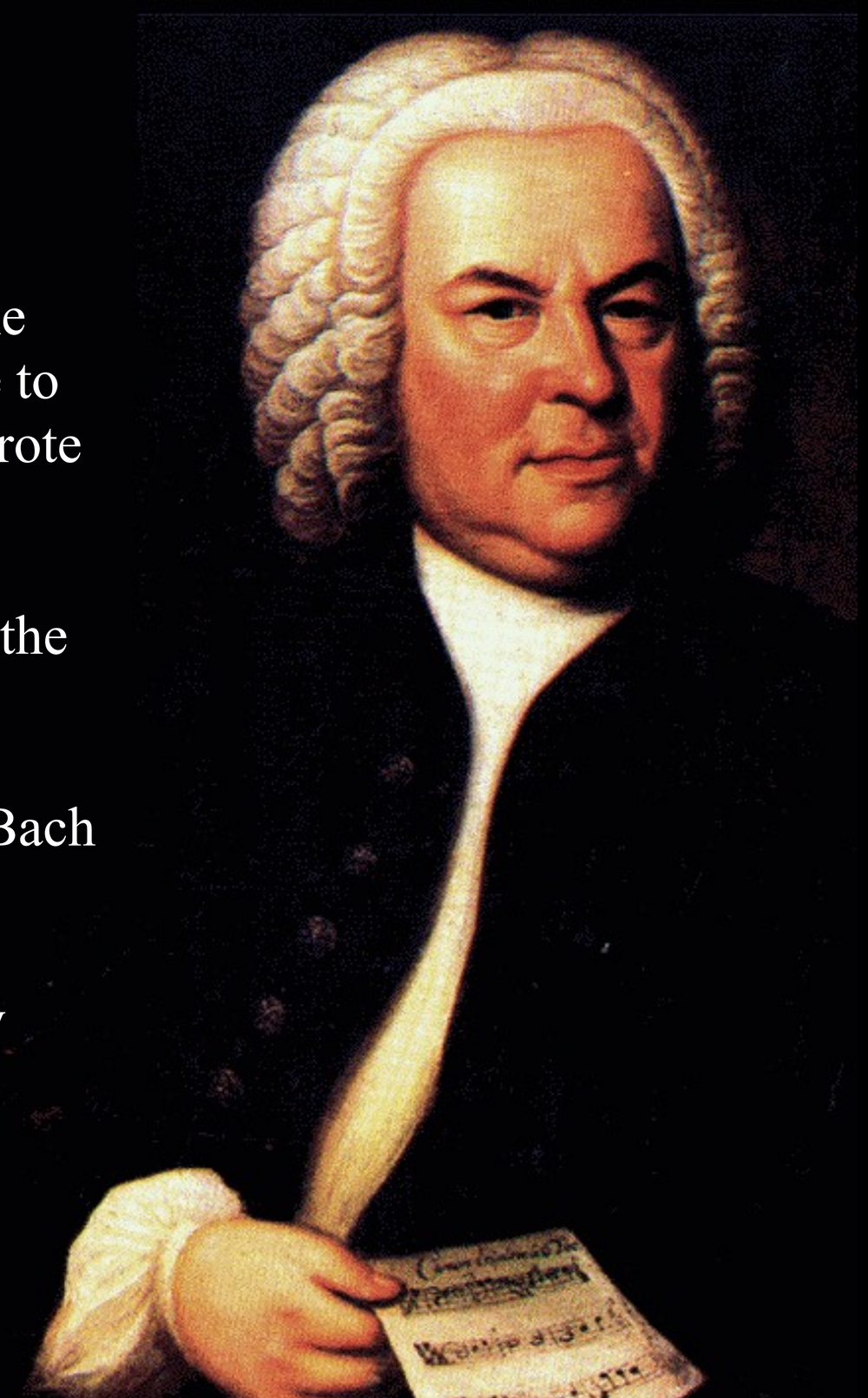
Jesus Christus, Gottes Sohn,
An unser Statt ist kommen
Und hat die Sünde weggetan,
Damit dem Tod genommen
All sein Recht und sein Gewalt,
Da bleibet nichts denn Tods Gestalt,
Den Stach'l hat er verloren.
Halleluja!

Jesus Christ, God's son,
has come to our place
and has put aside our sins,
and in this way from death has taken
all his rights and his power,
here remains nothing but death's
outward form, it has lost its sting.
Alleluia!

Bach wrote numerous cantatas during his years at the court of Weimar (1708-1717), but during his service to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen (1717-1723) he wrote no church cantatas at all.

Cöthen was Calvinist and therefore had no need for the elaborate church music of the Lutheran church.

Part of the Leipzig city council's reluctance to hire Bach in 1723 came from his rather spotty track record in cantata composition—the job of Cantor of the Thomaskirche and Nicolaikirche required the steady creation and performance of cantatas.



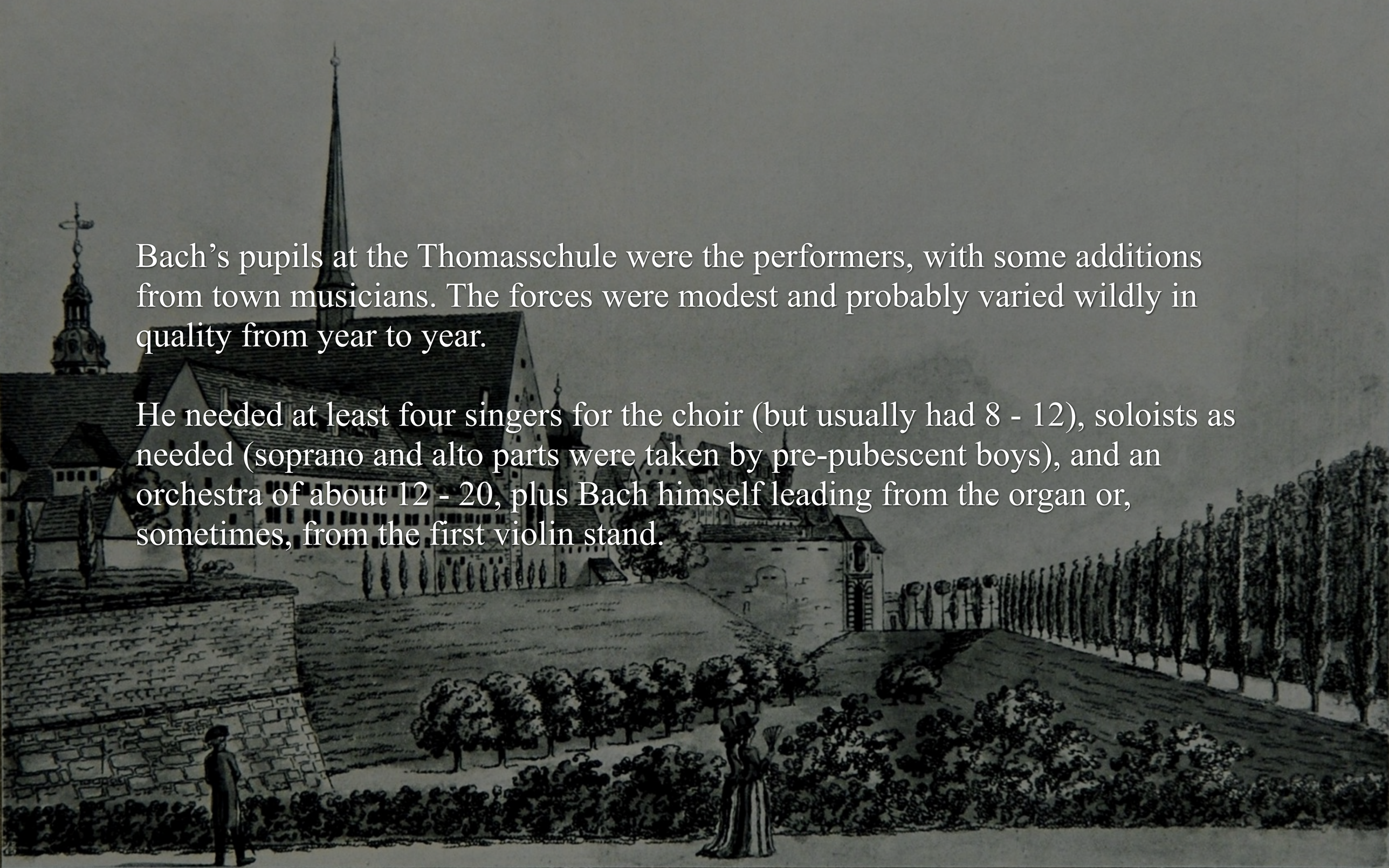
Cantatas were typically written in “cycles”—one cantata for each Sunday as well as special cantatas for the major feasts such as Christmas.

We know that Bach wrote five full cycles during his first decade in Leipzig.

However, two of the cycles are lost forever, having been entrusted to Bach’s troubled oldest son Wilhelm Friedemann after Sebastian’s death.

The Lutheran cantata had a fixed place in the Sunday and feast-day service: after the Gospel had been read but before the singing of the Lutheran creed *Wir glauben all an einen Gott.*

Given the length of the sermons (at least an hour) and the taking of Communion, cantatas were generally restricted in time to no more than half an hour.



Bach's pupils at the Thomasschule were the performers, with some additions from town musicians. The forces were modest and probably varied wildly in quality from year to year.

He needed at least four singers for the choir (but usually had 8 - 12), soloists as needed (soprano and alto parts were taken by pre-pubescent boys), and an orchestra of about 12 - 20, plus Bach himself leading from the organ or, sometimes, from the first violin stand.

J.S. Bach: Cantata BWV 140 *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*

Raymond Leppard / English Chamber Orchestra / Elly Ameling, *sop.* / Samuel Ramey, *bass* / Aldo Baldin, *ten.*

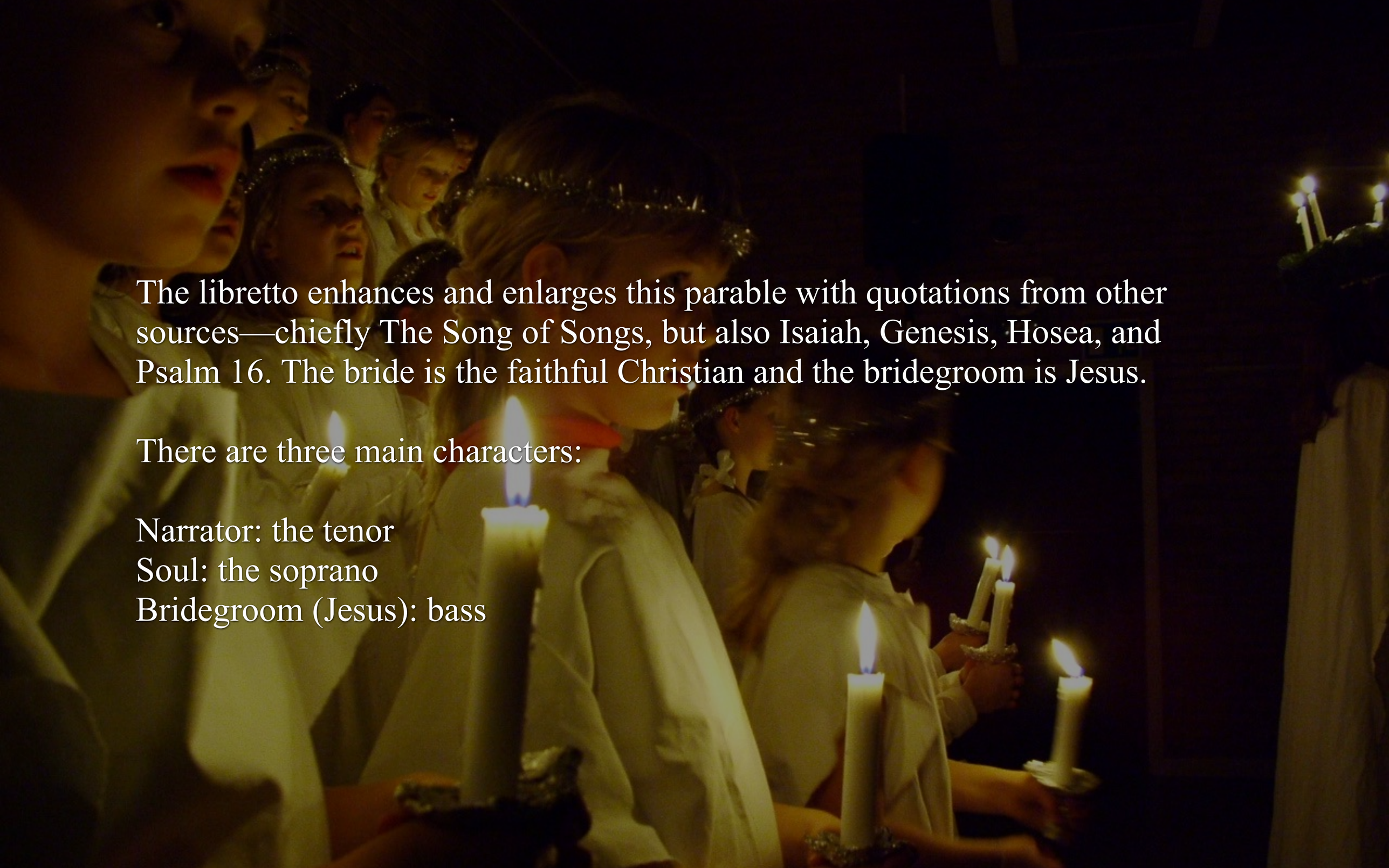
This cantata was written for 27th Sunday after Trinity in the Lutheran calendar. Because there is a 27th Sunday only when Easter falls early (before March 27), Cantata No. 140 can be dated quite securely to November 25, 1731—that being the only year before 1742 that there was such a Sunday during Bach's tenure in Leipzig.

The text for the first, fourth, and final movements is by Philipp Nicolai. The other movements—two recitatives, an aria, and a duet—are by an anonymous librettist.

Philipp Nicolai

The Gospel reading for the 27th Sunday after Trinity is Matthew 25:1–13, the parable of the ten virgins:

1 Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom.
2 And five of them were wise, and five were foolish.
3 They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them:
4 But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.
5 While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.
6 And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.
7 Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.
8 And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out.
9 But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves.
10 And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.
11 Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.
12 But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not.
13 Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.



The libretto enhances and enlarges this parable with quotations from other sources—chiefly The Song of Songs, but also Isaiah, Genesis, Hosea, and Psalm 16. The bride is the faithful Christian and the bridegroom is Jesus.

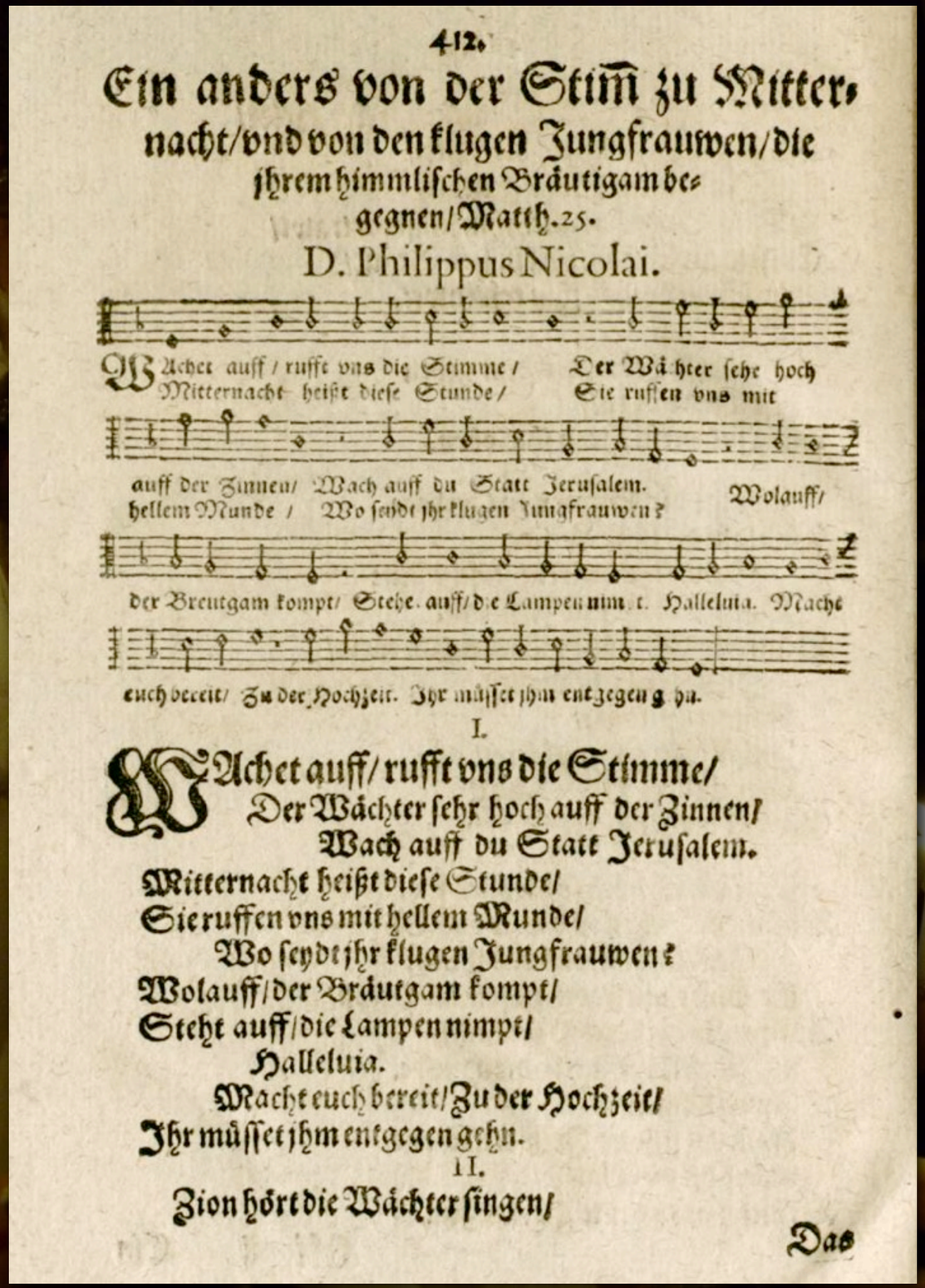
There are three main characters:

Narrator: the tenor
Soul: the soprano
Bridegroom (Jesus): bass

The movements:

1 - *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme (Awake, we are called by the voice)*
Full chorus and orchestra
2 - *Er kommt, er kommt (He comes, he comes)*
Tenor recitative
3 - *Wenn kömmst du, mein Heil? (When are you coming, my salvation?)*
Soprano and Bass duet
4 - *Zion hört die Wächter singen (Zion hears the watchmen singing)*
Full chorus and orchestra
5 - *So geth herein zu mir (Then come in to me)*
Bass recitative
6 - *Mein Freund ist mein (My beloved is mine)*
Soprano and Bass duet
7 - *Gloria sei dir gesungen (Glory be sung to you)*
Chorale with full chorus and orchestra

The Chorale



412.

Ein anders von der Stim̃ zu Mitternacht/vnd von den klugen Jungfrauwen/die jhrem himmlischen Bräutigam begegnen/Matth. 25.

D. Philippus Nicolai.

Wachet auff / rufft vns die Stimme / Der Wächter sehe hoch
Mitternacht heißt diese Stunde / Sie ruffen vns mit
auff der Zinnen / Wach auff du Statt Jerusalem.
hellem Munde / Wo seydt jhr klugen Jungfrauwen? Wolauff /
der Breutgam kompt / Stehe auff / die Lampen nimmt. Halleluia. Macht
euch bereit / Zu der Hochzeit. Jhr müsset jhm entgegen gehn.

I.

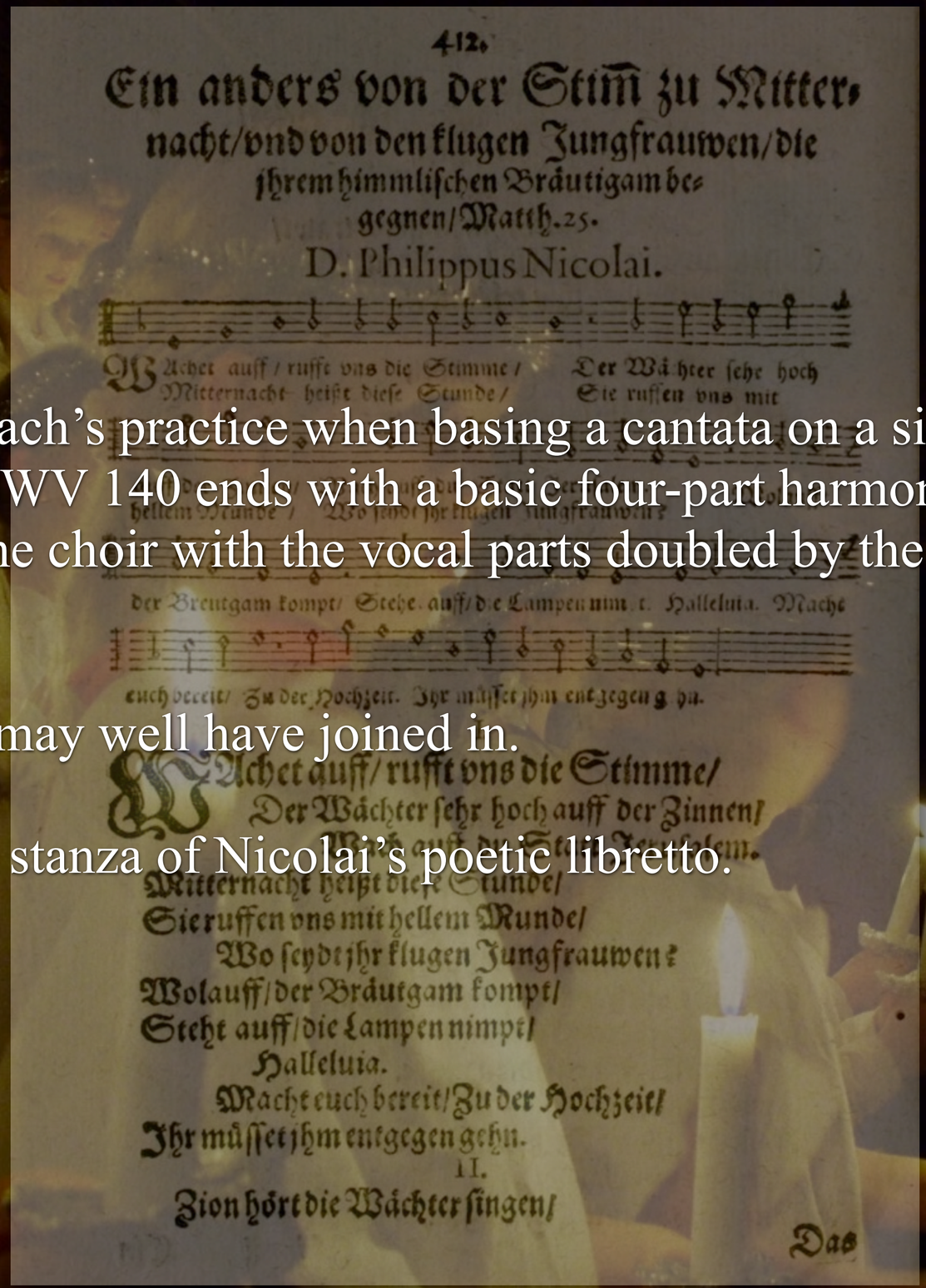
Wachet auff / rufft vns die Stimme /
Der Wächter sehr hoch auff der Zinnen /
Wach auff du Statt Jerusalem.
Mitternacht heißt diese Stunde /
Sie ruffen vns mit hellem Munde /
Wo seydt jhr klugen Jungfrauwen?
Wolauff / der Bräutgam kompt /
Steht auff / die Lampen nimpt /
Halleluia.
Macht euch bereit / Zu der Hochzeit /
Jhr müsset jhm entgegen gehn.

II.

Zion hört die Wächter singen /

Das

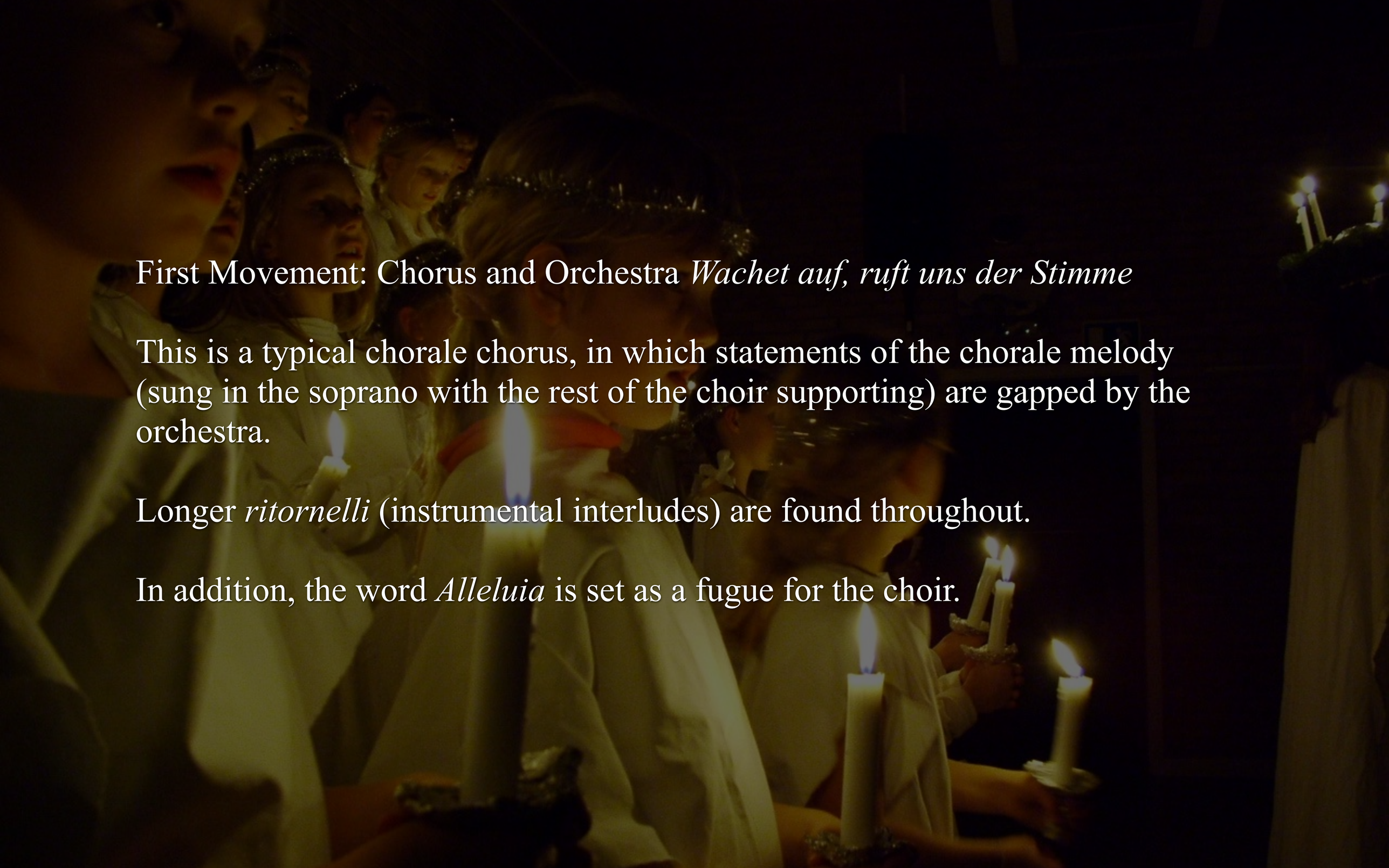
The Chorale



As is typical for Bach's practice when basing a cantata on a single chorale melody, Cantata BWV 140 ends with a basic four-part harmonization of the chorale, sung by the choir with the vocal parts doubled by the instruments of the orchestra.

The congregation may well have joined in.

The text is the last stanza of Nicolai's poetic libretto.



First Movement: Chorus and Orchestra *Wachet auf, ruft uns der Stimme*

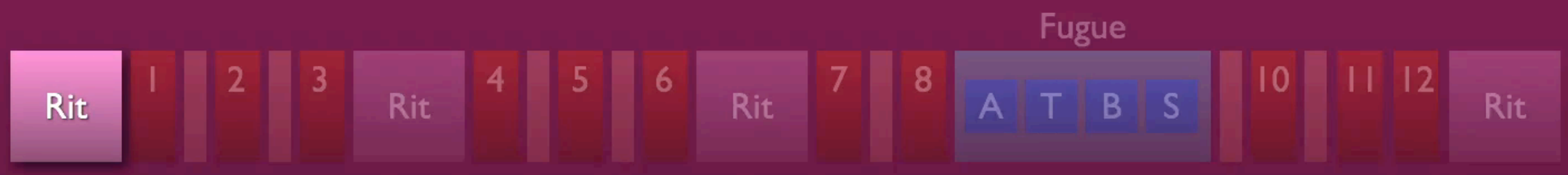
This is a typical chorale chorus, in which statements of the chorale melody (sung in the soprano with the rest of the choir supporting) are gapped by the orchestra.

Longer *ritornelli* (instrumental interludes) are found throughout.

In addition, the word *Alleluia* is set as a fugue for the choir.

1 - Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme
2 - Der Wächter sehr hoch auf der Zinne,
3 - Wach auf, du Stadt Jerusalem!
4 - Mitternacht heißt diese Stunde;
5 - Sie rufen uns mit hellem Munde:
6 - Wo seid ihr kugen Jungfrauen?
7 - Wohl auf, der Bräutgam kömmt;
8 - Steht auf, die Lampen nehmt!
9 - Alleluja!
10 - Macht euch bereit
11 - Zu der Hochzeit,
12 - Ihr müsset ihm entgegen gehn!

1 - 'Awake!', we are called by the voice of
2 - The watchmen very high on the battlement,
3 - 'Awake, you city of Jerusalem!'
4 - The hour is midnight;
5 - They call us with a clear voice:
6 - Where are you, you wise virgins?
7 - Rise up, the bridegroom comes;
8 - Stand up, take your lamps!
9 - Alleluia!
10 - Get ready
11 - For the wedding;
12 - You must go out to meet him!



1 - Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme
2 - Der Wächter sehr hoch auf der Zinne,
3 - Wach auf, du Stadt Jerusalem!
4 - Mitternacht heißt diese Stunde;
5 - Sie rufen uns mit hellem Munde:
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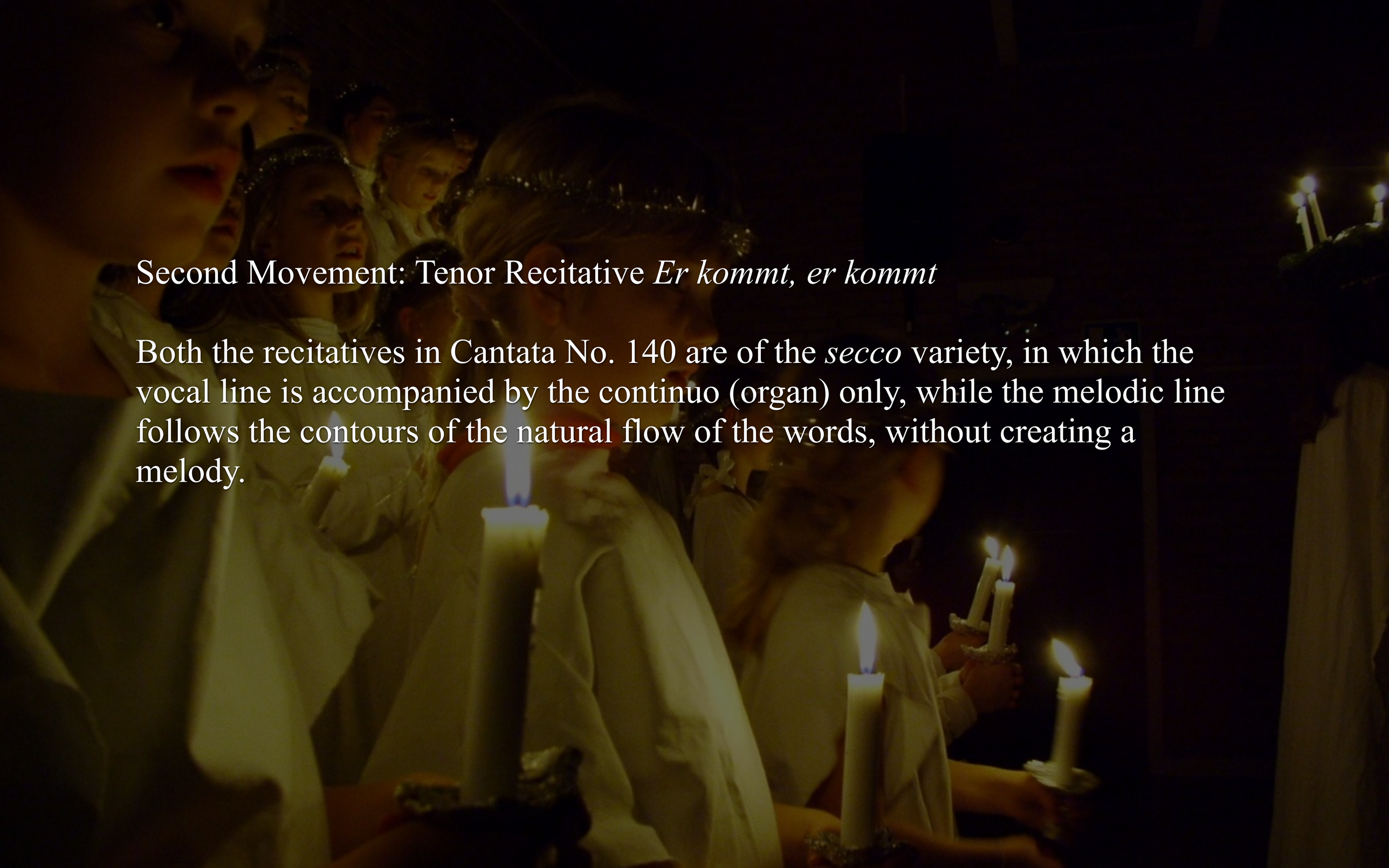


Second Movement: Tenor Recitative *Er kommt, er kommt*

Both the recitatives in Cantata No. 140 are of the *secco* variety, in which the vocal line is accompanied by the continuo (organ) only, while the melodic line follows the contours of the natural flow of the words, without creating a melody.

Er kommt, er kommt,
Der Bräutgam kommt!
Ihr Töchter Zions, kommt heraus,
Sein Ausgang eilet aus der Höhe
In euer Mutter Haus.
Der Bräutgam kommt, der einem Rehe
Und jungen Hirsche gleich
Auf denen Hügeln springt
Und euch das Mahl der Hochzeit bringt.
Wacht auf, ermuntert euch!
Den Bräutgam zu empfangen!
Dort, sehet, kommt er hergegangen.

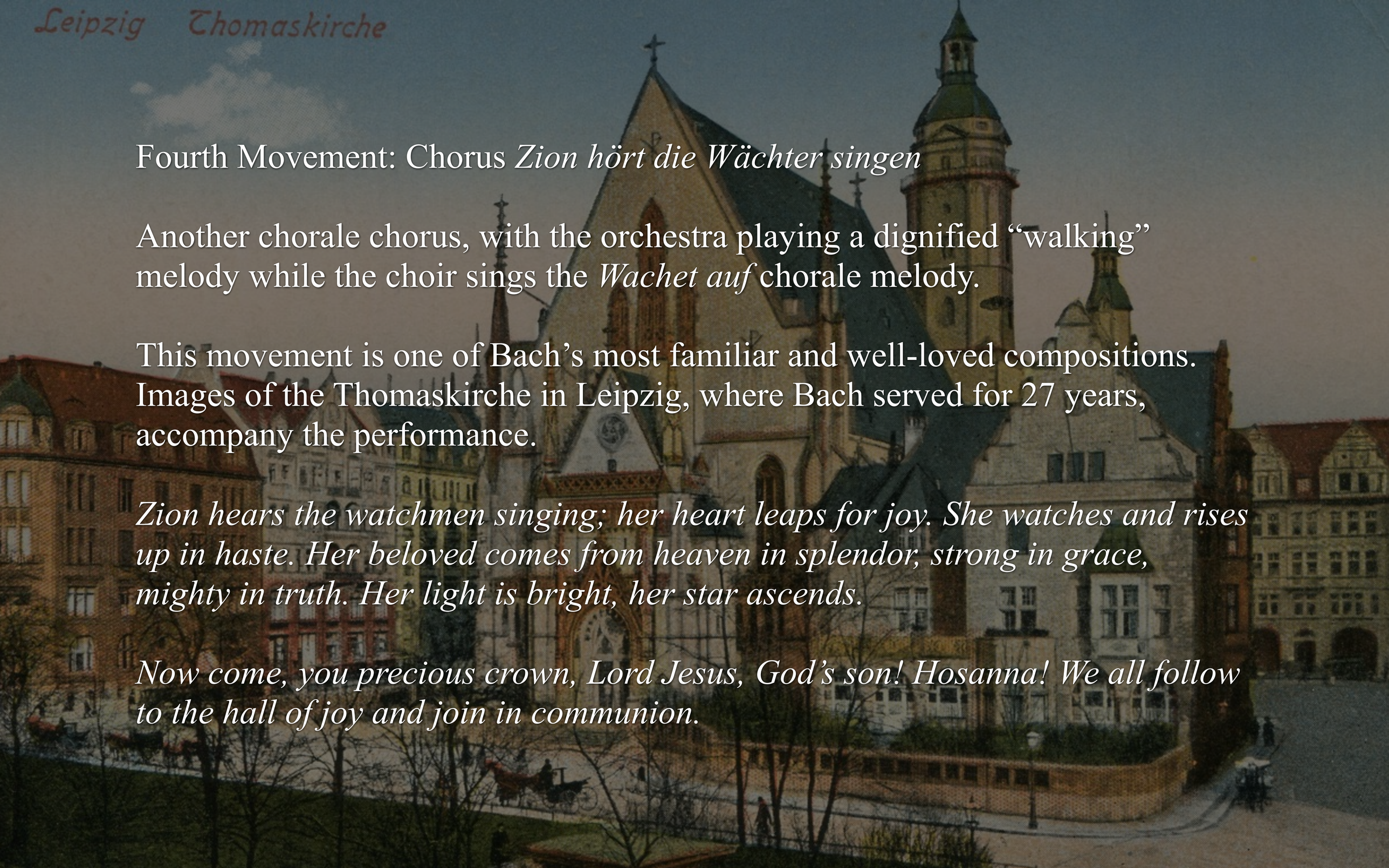
He comes, he comes,
The bridegroom comes!
You daughters of Zion, come forth:
His going forth hastens from on high
Into your mother's house.
The bridegroom comes, who like a roe,
Like a young hart,
Skips upon the hills
And brings you the wedding feast.
Awake, stir yourselves
To receive the bridegroom!
There, see, he is approaching.

Third Movement: Duetto (Soprano and Bass) *Wenn kömmst du, mein Heil?*

This aria, between the soul (soprano) and bridegroom (bass), is written in *dal segno* form, which resembles the standard *da capo* aria of Italian opera.

In a *da capo* aria, after stanzas A and B are sung, stanza A is repeated from the beginning (*da capo*). In an opera house, the *da capo* is ornamented by the singer, but in church music such ornamentation is usually omitted.

In a *dal segno* aria, the repeat of stanza A is fully written out and re-composed from the original. Typically the only passage repeated verbatim is the opening instrumental passage—that repeat is marked with a sign (*segno*). In this aria, a *violino piccolo* plays an *obbligato* (fluid melodic line) for the instrumental passages.



Fourth Movement: Chorus *Zion hört die Wächter singen*

Another chorale chorus, with the orchestra playing a dignified “walking” melody while the choir sings the *Wachet auf* chorale melody.

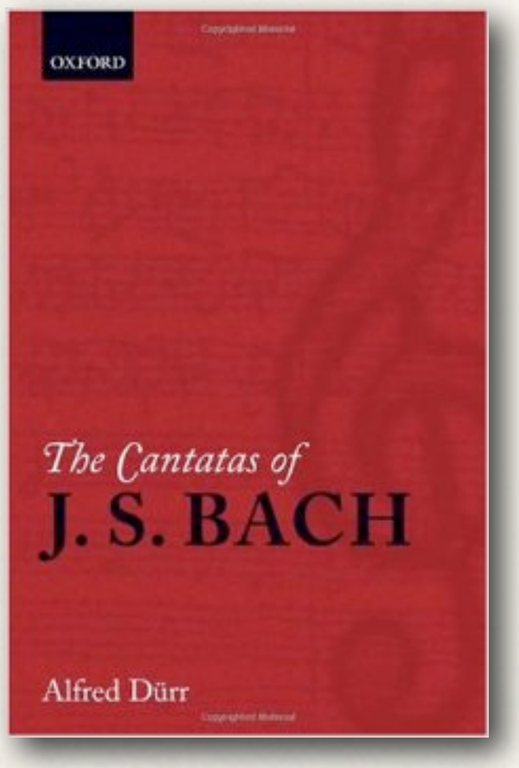
This movement is one of Bach’s most familiar and well-loved compositions. Images of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, where Bach served for 27 years, accompany the performance.

Zion hears the watchmen singing; her heart leaps for joy. She watches and rises up in haste. Her beloved comes from heaven in splendor, strong in grace, mighty in truth. Her light is bright, her star ascends.

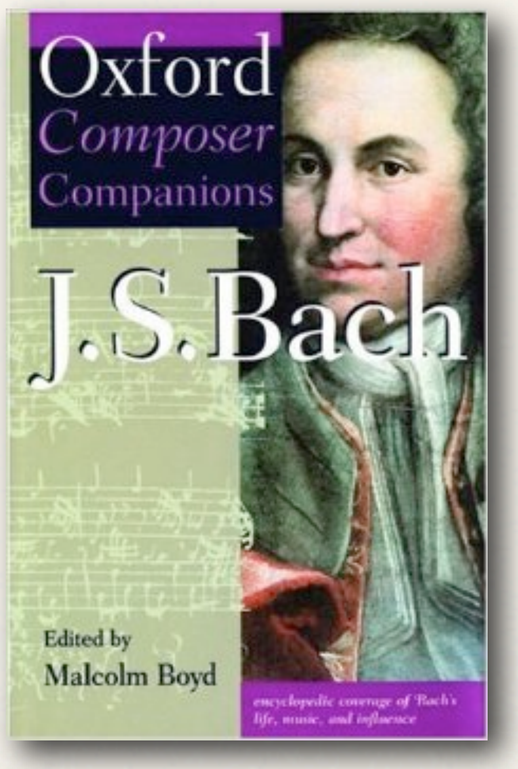
Now come, you precious crown, Lord Jesus, God’s son! Hosanna! We all follow to the hall of joy and join in communion.

Some Resources for the Bach Cantatas

Alfred Dürr: The Cantatas of J.S. Bach



Oxford Composer Companions: J.S. Bach



Today's Recording