
Bach: Choralvorspiel BWV 667 (Arr.)



Title	Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, Heiliger Geist, Choralvorspiel BWV 667 von Johann Sebastian Bach
Time of Origin	1922
Premiere	7 December 1922, New York, Carnegie Hall
Duration	ca. 3 min.

In terms of his compositional output, Schönberg's orchestrations of two chorale preludes as well as the Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Major by Johann Sebastian Bach belong to the decade that witnessed his pioneering creation of a new "method of composition with twelve tones related only to one another," with which he claimed to have secured the "supremacy" of German music for another century. In this understanding of history, Bach, who was always relevant for Schönberg, formed the starting point of a long line of tradition: "I used to say: Bach is the first twelve-tone composer. That was a joke, of course. [...] Undoubtedly, he possessed a deep insight into the hidden secrets of tonal relationships. He certainly was able to present his thoughts clearly and comprehensibly." ("Bach," 1950)

The concept for arranging two Bach chorale preludes in 1922 probably dates back to the last year of World War I, as indicated by corresponding sketches and entries in Schönberg's 1918 notebook. From the two volumes of Bach's organ works in the Peters edition that belonged to Schönberg's estate, there were originally plans for at least five works to be orchestrated, and a number of other Bach works also contain annotations that allow conclusions to be drawn regarding plans for instrumentation. At the end of April 1922, in Mödling, Schönberg completed the score to the chorale prelude "Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, Heiliger Geist" (BWV 667) for orchestra, followed by "Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele" (BWV 654) on June 24; both works came from Bach's "Great Eighteen Chorale Preludes" (Achtzehn Choräle verschiedener Art). The following summer, Schönberg offered the two arrangements to conductor Josef Stransky, who premiered them with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in New York on December 7, 1922. In a letter dated July 31, 1930 to his friend, the Kapellmeister Fritz Stiedry, Schönberg commented at length on the two chorale preludes and his views on the performance practice of Bach's organ works: "Our 'sound requirements' are not aimed at 'tasteful' colorfulness; rather, the colors are intended to clarify the linear progression of the voices, and this is very important within a contrapuntal texture! We do not know whether the organs of Bach's time could achieve this. Today's organists cannot: I know that (and that is one of my starting points!) [...] Purely 'pleasant' effect created by the harmony of artfully interwoven voices is no longer enough for us. We need: transparency in order to be able to see through." In his transposition of the compositional source material, Schönberg's aim was both to reveal and to "conceal" the motivic work, to align the dynamics of the individual voices with the transparency of the overall sound, and to "correctly distribute the

important elements within a musical line." In this context, the phrasing does not add pathos and affect, but rather provides thematic differentiation. In the chorale prelude "Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, Heiliger Geist," the basic motive of the contrapuntal voices is developed by mirroring the main motive of the chorale melody and by accentuating the formation of variants. Schönberg states the cantus firmus twice: it is first played by the oboes and E-flat clarinets, and then by the bassoon, contrabassoon, trombones and bass tuba. The prevailing atmosphere is frequently interrupted, whereby the contrapuntal nature of the work manifests itself both in terms of its structural elements as well as the timbral colors created through the technique of Klangfarbenmelodie (tone-color melody). The significance of each phrase and coloring for Schönberg is evident in his precise performing indications that include meticulous phrasing marks and carefully differentiated dynamic markings - each individual musical event, each moment of sound is enlivened by technical performance details. What Schönberg would later write about his arrangement of Bach's Prelude and Fugue also applies here: "[...] I have, so to speak, modernized the organ, replaced its slow, infrequent change of colors with richer ones that illuminate the presentation and character of the individual passages, and I have enhanced the clarity of the linear textures." (Letter to Anton Webern, November 13, 1934)

Therese Muxeneder | © Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien
www.schoenberg.at