

## Two Chorale Preludes

**Schmücke Dich, o liebe Seele BWV 654**

**Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, heiliger Geist BWV 667**

### Johann Sebastian Bach, orch. Arnold Schoenberg

On December 7, 1922, Music Director Josef Stransky led the New York Philharmonic in the World Premiere of Arnold Schoenberg's orchestrations of two chorale preludes by Johann Sebastian Bach, the first time a new work by Schoenberg was premiered in America. It was a coup for the Orchestra to introduce these pieces by the towering figure of Viennese modernism, a composer deeply enmeshed in the world of atonality and on the verge of codifying his "method of composing with 12 tones that are related only to one another." Program Annotator Lawrence Gilman devoted five jam-packed pages of the program to exultant discussion of what amounts to perhaps seven minutes of music.

From Bach's approximately 200 organ chorales, Schoenberg selected two that Bach composed while serving on the staff of the Duke of Weimar, and then included (with revisions) in the set known as the "Eighteen Chorales," compiled in Leipzig from about 1739 to 1742. The two are of strikingly different character. In *Schmücke Dich, o liebe Seele* (*Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness*), Gilman found Bach "at his most tenderly and mystically lovely" and quoted composer and Bach biographer Hubert Parry as saying that it sounds "as if Bach could be felt communing with his own soul, which he has adorned with all the loveliest qualities a poetic imagination could supply." After Robert Schumann heard Felix Mendelssohn play this work in Bach's own St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, he wrote to Mendelssohn that

the melody seemed interlaced with garlands of gold, and the work breathed forth such happiness that you yourself avowed

that "Were life deprived of all trust, of all faith, this simple chorale would restore all to me."

*Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, heiliger Geist* (*Come God, Creator, Holy Ghost*), which Schoenberg set using the longer of two versions Bach produced, has an energetic, jubilant mien. It consists of two variations on the underlying hymn tune. In his book *J.S. Bach's Great Eighteen Chorales*, the organist and musicologist Russell Stinson suggests that "if played fast enough, its compound meter easily suggests a gigue, especially in Variation I" and observes that "the syncopated pedal line of this variation is almost primitively dancelike in nature."

Schoenberg approached Bach with great respect in both pieces, adding only occasional touches of extra counterpoint or other elaboration. But as orchestration, what he has produced is masterly. He

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## In Short

**Born:** March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Thuringia (Germany)

**Died:** July 28, 1750, in Leipzig

**Works composed and premiered:** for organ, ca. 1708–17, revised ca. 1740; orchestrated in 1922 by Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)

**World premiers:** unknown; orchestration by Schoenberg, premiered December 7, 1922, by the New York Philharmonic, Josef Stransky, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic**

**performance:** March 1, 1958, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 7 minutes

employs a large orchestra (including an unusually rich assortment woodwinds) to underscore specific contours within the music by means of meticulously plotted changes of tone, color, articulation, dynamics, and variations of tempo. Phrases, or even notes within phrases, emerge and subside to emphasize momentary events. It is, in a way, not so very different from the ephemeral orchestration associated with Schoenberg's pupil Anton Webern, or from what Schoenberg called *Klangfarbenmelodie* (sound-color melody), a pointillistic sort of orchestration in which

a single melody is split up sequentially among multiple instruments, each adding its own color to a particular contour within the phrase.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes and two piccolos, two oboes and two English horns, two clarinets plus two E-flat clarinets and two bass clarinets, two bassoons and two contrabassoons, four horns, four trumpets, four trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, orchestra bells, harp, celesta, and strings, including a prominent solo cello part in *Schmücke Dich*.

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## In the Orchestrator's Words

In 1930 Schoenberg wrote a letter to the conductor Fritz Stiedry in which he expounded on the ideas and intentions behind his orchestrations of the two Bach chorale preludes. Among his comments:



Schoenberg, as photographed by Man Ray, 1927

Our aural requirements do not aim at any "full flavor" that comes of varied color; rather, colors help to clarify the movement of the parts, and, in a contrapuntal texture, that is very important! ... The use of phrasing must not be dominated by mood and emotion, as in the age of pathos, phrasing has

1. To apportion correct relative weights within the line.
2. At times to reveal the motivic work, at others to obscure it.
3. To ensure that each part exercises consideration, in terms of dynamics, for all the other parts, and for the sound as a whole (transparency).

And many other things, too. So here, I believe, the right to transcribe turns into a duty.