Homilius’ “Unser Vater in dem Himmel”

by Glorianne Earley
Gottfried August Homilius’

1714-1785

J.S. Bach taught him musical composition and keyboard skills

Served as Kantor at a church in Dresden (the Kreuzkirche; 1755-1785)

His compositions include, among others,

- more than 200 sacred cantatas
- “Magnificat” settings
- Organ works

Ernst Ludwig Gerber “was led to conclude in 1790 that ‘without question he was our greatest church composer’”
Empfindsamer Stil

- “Sensitive style”
- Developed in the 1700’s and of German origin
- Aims to express “true and natural” feelings
  - Unlike the Baroque period’s “Doctrine of the Affections” which required only 1 emotion or mood be depicted throughout a composition, *Empfindsamer Stil* features multiple, sudden contrasts of mood
- C. P. E. Bach is considered the “most important exponent” of the style
About the Piece

• “Unser Vater in dem Himmel”
  • Composed in 1766
  • Through-composed
  • For 4 voices
  • Makes use of empfindsamer Stil
“Thy kingdom come” (mm. 18-25)

• “Come” is stressed through melismatic and neumatic writing
  • Most notable use in the piece, since the choir joins in their use of non-syllabic singing
• After “Thy kingdom come” is repeated, “come” is suddenly sung in mm. 23-25 by all voices
• Abrupt use suggests a plea for God’s kingdom to finally come
“Give us this day…” (mm. 42-49)

- Shortest portion (2 four-measure phrases)
- Homophonic phrase (Unser…) is sequentially notated a whole step higher
  - The repeating material could imply the routines of daily life while a new pitch level implies variances of each day
- Rich, major harmonies hint at the pleasures of earthly gifts such as sunshine and clothing
“Forgive us our debts…” (mm. 50-59)

- Imitative, chromatic passage
- Overlapping of the text in mm. 50-52 creates a sense of distress
  - Text asks one be forgiven as they forgive, yet says – indirectly – they have erred ("forgive us our debts")
  - Seemingly requests remission of error depend upon ability to not err ("as we forgive") which is not happening (since they have debts)
- Threefold, homophonic repetition of "forgive us" occurs in mm. 53-55 and counters tension with repentant, hopeful request
  - "Forgive us as we forgive our debtors," though a reminder of the demands of the Law, also recalls the baptized's life is hidden in Christ; they do forgive as Jesus forgave
About the Doxology (mm. 80-149)

• “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”
  • Familiar conclusion to the prayer
  • Not included in the oldest manuscripts, but a common addition
• Likely derived from 1 Chronicles 29:11 (“Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, … thine is the kingdom”)
  • other texts such as Revelation 4:11 (“Worthy art thou … to receive glory and honor and power”) are also similar
• Echoes the “thou-petitions” in the first part of the prayer
  • “Thine is the glory” reminiscent of “hallowed by thy name”
  • “Thine is the kingdom” repeats “thy kingdom come”
  • “Thine is the power” corresponds to “thy will be done”
“For thine is the kingdom...” (mm. 80-149)

- Word painting helps note the perpetuity of God's reign
- About forty-five percent of the piece is the doxology
- Joyous and set in a quick, simple-duple meter
- A six measure phase begins in the soprano. The initial imitations in the other voices (mm. 86, 97, 103) enter a voice lower (alto, tenor, bass)
  - The phrase is stretched across the scale as God's kingdom, power, and glory come down from heaven to man. Use of major triads reflect this to not be of concern.
    - Possibly, Homilius went a chapter further in the Matthew text and aims the music reflect Matt. 7:11b “how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (ESV)


