



April 24, 2023

Bach in a Minute

(in memory of the founder of this “Faith Matters” series,
our dear Bob McQuilkin)

One of the reasons faith matters is because it has lasting power. Our stories about God’s presence and purpose go back thousands of years. Our theological neighborhood, the Reformed tradition, was built five hundred years ago. And our hymnbook is a treasure box with jewels collected over millennia.

When I was a kid, I was attracted to the hymns with sturdy melodies but complex accompaniments, the ones with lots of black notes climbing up and down in the alto, tenor, and bass lines. Most of those turned out to have been Lutheran chorales (hymns) harmonized by J S Bach, on tunes that were already centuries old when he started decorating them in the early 1700s.

By my teens, I found out that there were a lot more of those than just the handful in the Psalter Hymnal that we Christian Reformed Dutch Calvinists sang from. The Lutherans had more in their hymnbooks, but still nowhere near all of them. I wanted one single book I could pull off a shelf and be able to sing along, in any language, all of the 300 or so different chorale melodies that show up in Bach’s works.

I ended up becoming a music historian by profession and kept looking for that book. Plenty of books had all the notes, but not the words, because Bach’s harmonizations become the standard way of teaching the grammar of chords to three centuries of music students. But these editions all left out the words —fascinated by Bach’s music theory, musicologists all too often ignored the words that prompted him to make such loving settings of the chorale tunes in the first place.

So for fifty years I hunted for and never found that one book. Along the way I came across many hearty old Victorian translations, particularly by the great

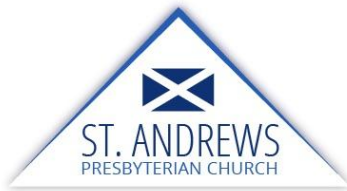
Catherine Winkworth (b. 1827) and Charles Sanford Terry (b. 1864), but their style of English was very flowery and complex, with lots of thees and thous and haths and vouchsafes and naughts, unlike the extremely simple German that the chorales are written in. As I taught Bach over the years, I started collecting, then making my own, singable English translations.

Finally, in retirement, still not having found the book I'd longed for, I decided to do it myself, directly inspired by a sermon Rev Anne preached about 'doing something beautiful for God.' I finished it in 2019, and initial enthusiasm from publishers vanished as Covid devastated the church music industry. So instead a friend of mine volunteered to record all 300 chorales, on a \$2M organ in a church built during Bach's lifetime, and finally a month ago, I launched the Bach Hymnbook online as a series of YouTube videos. One chorale comes out each weekday, with singable translations in modern English and the original German for comparison.

Have a listen, sing or read along, and see what it does to your day to start or end it with one minute of Bach: tunes 500 years old, harmonizations 300 years old, translations brand new. Here's the link- Click below.

[Link to music](#)

~Written by Ruth Griffioen



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