PASSACAGLIA

*J.S. Bach’s Dark Night of the Soul*

A Play in Two Acts

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STAGE SETUP

All stage directions are from the actors’ point of view.

Unless otherwise shown, “audience” means the theater audience.

Stage Right has a short stairway to an organ loft. The loft holds an organ console, with two stools for sitting. It faces the audience at an oblique angle. Organ pipes adorn the wall behind and a large crucifix hangs in front of the console above Bach’s face.

Center Stage is a turntable that can be a:

1. Music Hall, with a dais, music stands, a clavichord and a chandelier against a backdrop of gilded mirrors or

2) Study (with desk), Bedroom (with bed) or Dining Room (with dining table and chairs)against a backdrop of latticed windows or

3) Church Interior, with pulpit against a backdrop of stained-glass windows.

Stage Left is a street scene with coach that uses back drops to change 1)a row of shops 2) the entrance to a palace or 3) the entrance to a 17th-century apartment building.

CHARACTERS

BACH – All ages.

MARIA/ANNA – Bach’s two wives.

ANDREAS/DOORMAN/PASTOR – Bach’s best friend/Silent part in Act I, Scene 12/During Easter Mass, in Act II, scene 9.

CATHARINA/SINGER/SERVANT GIRL – Bach’s oldest daughter/Silent Part in Act I, Scene 2/Silent part in Act I, Scene 8.

FREDERICK/MAN’S STERN VOICE O.S./DR. TAYLOR – Prince and King of Prussia/Pastor O.S. in Act I, Scene 5/Eye surgeon in Act II, Scene 13.

CARL/THOMAS/ERNST– Bach’s oldest son/Masked ruffian in Act I, Scene 8/ Old rector at St. Thomas in Act II, Scene 7.

LEOPOLD/ERNESTI – Prince of Anhalt-Koethen/New Rector at St. Thomas in Act II, Scene 12.

CHOIR BOY’S and YOUNG CARL’S VOICES O.S. – Pre-recorded.

ACT I

SCENE 1

J.S. Bach, age 65 and his vision failing, enters Stage Right and stops below the stairs to the organ loft. He speaks into a darkened Center Stage.

BACH

Choir Boy, you may start working the bellows at any time.

CHOIR BOY’S VOICE O.S.

Yes, Herr Capellmeister.

BACH

Remain in the chamber until I call for you. I will reward you handsomely for your labors. I know it’s ungodly hour.

CHOIR BOY’S VOICE O.S.

Thank you, Herr Capellmeister!

Bach slowly climbs the stairs, feeling his way along the rail. He settles before the organ console and searches the keyboard and stops with his hands. He looks up at the crucifix dangling above his head.

BACH

My Passacaglia. I must play it one last time or I shall never sleep.

We hear the opening bass notes of the [PASSACAGLIA AND FUGUE IN C MINOR](https://youtu.be/FpZfvlWJbjg) being played on a pipe organ. Bach looks directly upward into the spotlight, the shadow of the crucifix falling across his face.

BACH (CONT’D)

Do you hear it, dear God? Do you? The lonely soul crying out for you? That is my soul, and I hear nothing in return.

Bach continues playing and speaking throughout the scene.

He reaches the PASSACAGLIA'S FIRST VARIATION, a series of solemn, rising notes against the steady, mysterious undertow of the bass.

BACH (CONT’D)

Now the pleading voice of reason. Frail, thin. Teetering on despair. But still you do not answer. It is not words I seek – those pitiful mouthings of mankind, so full of lies and deception. I beg to hear your voice again through music – your music. A voice I have not heard for months now.

He begins the PASSACAGLIA’S SECOND VARIATION of slowly plunging notes.

BACH (CONT’D)

My soul is as blind now as my eyes. It is all blackness, the blackness of the damned. How could it be otherwise? I have struggled all my life with the sins of vanity and pride and anger.

The PASSACAGLIA’S THIRD AND FOURTH VARIATIONS rise once again with hope, then fade to silence... (End Passacaglia link at 3:08)

SCENE 2

With lights out, we hear the final frantic measures of CPE Bach’s [“FLUTE CONCERTO IN D MINOR”](https://youtu.be/Saiua_YpsGg?t=350) and, then, spotlight on Center Stage, Music Hall, where King FREDERICK stands alone playing the final notes on his flute. The audience for the performance is the theater audience. Frederick finishes to much APPLAUSE and begins taking deep, grandiose bows when Bach, nearly blind, enters Stage Right on the arm of his famous son, CARL(Philipp Emanuel or CPE Bach).

FREDERICK

(to the audience)

Ladies and Gentlemen, old Bach has come! Accompanied by his brilliant son, Carl, whose concerto you’ve just heard.

Frederick urges APPLAUSE while Carl helps Bach sit at the clavichord, and takes a seat beside his father.

FREDERICK

(to the audience)

For your listening pleasure, I present to you the greatest keyboard artist in all of Prussia, perhaps all the world - the grand old master himself. Herr Johann Sebastian Bach!

Again, Frederick urges APPLAUSE.

BACH

But your majesty, I have only just arrived after a full day by coach–

FREDERICK

Tut, tut. Here, I shall give you a theme. It is my command that you create from it the "divine magic" of one of your charming old fugues.

The King plays a SERIES OF EXTREMELY COMPLEX NOTES on his flute that defy melody much less a fugue.



He looks to the audience and winks broadly. Carl, guilty and embarrassed, covers his face in his hand for a moment.

Bach arches an eyebrow as he REPEATS THE NOTES on the

harpsichord, tentatively at first, then a second time more melodically. He shakes his head - an impossible task. The King winks this time at Carl, who is more uncomfortable by the second.

Bach positions his hands on the keys, eyes closed. (Bach’s [MUSICAL OFFERING](https://youtu.be/AzT_elDRLJM?t=38) will be edited for its highlights in this section.) He opens them and begins a SIMPLE VARIATION on the King's theme, followed by a SECOND, and a THIRD, building the speed and complexity of his fugue until both hands are racing up and down the keyboard, weaving the complex theme into a RICH TAPESTRY OF SOUND -- with SIX VARIATIONS in all.

Bach finishes and the theater audience erupts in WILD APPLAUSE - until the King scowls at them for their disloyalty.

Bach rises from his seat, wanting to leave. Carl comes to his side.

Lights only on father and son.

BACH

(sotte voce)

Carl, why thus humiliate me?

CARL

As you can see, you have not been humiliated. Quite the contrary.

Stage lights return.

Frederick motions Carl to seat his father again.

CARL

Please, Father, for the King.

FREDERICK

A charming ditty, indeed, Herr Bach. Perhaps you could entertain us with, say, three more variations.

Carl raises his hand in a “stop” gesture toward Frederick, but the King only grins in return.

BACH

As you wish, your highness.

Bach searches the keyboard for possibilities, fingers moving here and there but not touching, until his hands and arms begin to tremble.

BACH (CONT’D)

I am sorry, your highness. Perhaps if I had more time.

FREDERICK

Well, that will do, Herr Bach. May we count on your “divine inspiration” another time?

He then turns to the audience, oblivious to any answer from Bach.

FREDERICK

We have with us tonight another special guest, a lovely soprano...

As the SINGER enters Stage Right, the spotlight focuses again only on Bach and Carl.

Carl attempts to help Bach rise from the bench, but Bach angrily shrugs him away.

BACH

(sotto voce)

Unhand me. Where’s Anna?

CARL

(sotto voce)

Father, I am sorry if –

BACH

(sotte voce, angrily)

Don’t dare call me “father.” You are no longer my son!

(He turns his head looking.)

Anna? Where’s Anna?

LIGHTS FADE.

Bach sits alone now at the organ console.

BACH

Perhaps if I had listened to my own father as a child. I was only nine and already full of myself when he said to me, “Sebastian, you play the violin beautifully. But you are perhaps wanting in humility. There is no need for so much flourish.”

I asked, “Father, what is humility?” He burst into laughter, the timbre of which I remember so well -- loud and cheerful and loving. His laugh was like the roaring fire of a hearth on the coldest day. He said, “You will know humility, Sebastian, when you place God deepest in your heart.”

Have I failed so miserably in that, my Lord? And yet, without my vanity, how would I have survived otherwise? You made me an orphan, with an orphan’s stubborn pride.

SCENE 3

Action moves to Stage Left, where a young Bach meets his teenage friend Andreas in front of a backdrop of a village main street. Both are weary travelers, wearing dirty caps and carrying sticks over their shoulders with scarves holding their meager possessions. They come to a saloon with a sign over the entrance: "Lodgings -- 50 pfennigs." They stare at it, then both put down their sticks, reach for their change purses and pour out their pitiful few coins into their hands.

BACH

It won't be enough, Andreas, even if we share a cot. Besides, we must save money for food. We have three more days of walking until we reach Lueneburg.

ANDREAS

But I can't possibly sleep another night in the woods. I'll die of cold, I will.

BACH

Perhaps there's a barn.

ANDREAS

Not again! We were nearly killed by the last farmer who found us. I'm the one whose head was crowned by the milk pail.

BACH

Then there is but one choice left to us.

Bach takes off his muddy hat and throws it at his feet, then reaches into his travel sack and pulls out the case for his violin. He opens the case and smiles.

BACH

You dance, I play.

Andreas looks around at the audience with scorn.

ANDREAS

For these rubes? What could we possibly perform that would entertain them?

BACH

We shall improvise.

Bach tucks the violin beneath his chin and breaks into the [IRISH SWALLOWTAIL JIG](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZxAVUsuE4Y). Andreas catches the spirit and begins to dance, slapping his limbs in rhythm. People in the audience throw coins into the hat, one after the other, until finally, a well-dressed OLDER MAN tosses a bag of coins at their feet.

OLDER MAN

(shouting)

Take thee to a bath house, you filthy swine!

Still dancing, Andreas turns to Bach and grins...

SCENE 4

The street backdrop lifts to show a small room with two sleeping cots and a desk and chair by a latticed window. Bach and Andreas lie faces up in their cots, side by side. Bach BURPS loudly.

ANDREAS

Are you awake, Sebastian?

BACH

No, fool, only my stomach.

Andreas LAUGHS, then SIGHS.

ANDREAS

I can't wait until we reach St. Michael's. We'll have our very own beds there, won't we?

BACH

As scholarship students, we will have nothing but the best. Sausage every day.

Bach BURPS AGAIN. They LAUGH.

ANDREAS

How much money have we left, Sebastian?

BACH

Enough for two more night's lodging - if we don't squander it on more sausage and beer.

(He yawns and rolls away to his side.)

Now, let us sleep and digest.

Andreas SIGHS AGAIN.

ANDREAS

Sebastian?

BACH

(impatiently)

Yes?

ANDREAS

I'm frightened.

BACH

(softer)

Of what, my friend?

ANDREAS

Your voice has broken, mine has not. It's a family trait, I'm afraid. My mother says my father was still warbling like a eunuch when she married him.

BACH

Then how did you happen to appear?

Andreas hits Bach with his pillow. Bach erupts in LAUGHTER.

ANDREAS

Sebastian, please. I'm baring my soul here. So what if St. Michael's no longer wants me when my voice breaks? What if I lose my scholarship?

BACH

You won’t, and even if you do, you at least have a home to return to.

ANDREAS

Sebastian, I know I shouldn’t complain. I haven’t forgotten that your own brother threw you out of his home.

BACH

Yes, and because he knew I was a better musician than he would ever be. If only my parents were still alive . . .

ANDREAS

But, Sebastian, you play the violin and the viola and the organ. What about me? I have no other talent but my voice. They'll toss me into the street.

Bach rolls over to look at his friend.

BACH

They shan't. I shall see to it. And once I am graduated, I will take you with me to any position that comes my way. You will be my assistant.

ANDREAS

(excitedly)

I will?

BACH

You have no choice. Now be a good assistant and go to sleep.

Bach rolls away again.

ANDREAS

Sebastian, I wish I were as brave as you.

BACH

Humph. You might wish yourself dead if you don’t sleep.

Georg CHUCKLES and rolls away.

LIGHTS FADE.

Back to Stage Right, where Bach is at the organ.

BACH

Little did I know that it would be Andreas who would abandon ME. (Pause) But then, dear God, you brought Maria into my life. Ah, dearest Maria, and the sweetness of first love.

We hear the soft, romantic strains of Bach’s [“Air on G”](https://youtu.be/U7RYSQvrUrc) as Bach continues to reminisce.

BACH

I spied her first from my bedroom window. A young maiden who came frequently to the village fountain. And I remember thinking, I know that maiden. I’ve known her all my life. But I couldn’t remember where.

MUSIC AND LIGHTS FADE.

SCENE 5

When the lights rise again a young Bach stands behind the organ console with a baton in his hand, SCREAMING at an unseen youth in the darkness of Center Stage. At the same time, MARIA BARBARA enters the church door at the bottom of the loft stairs.

BACH

(shouting)

You, young man, need not return to choir! I’ve had enough of your disruptive antics. And, by the way, you play the bassoon like - like a braying nanny goat!

Offstage, we hear the sound of a BASSOON MAKING A LOUD NOISE LIKE A GOAT.

Bach races downstairs to chase the youth and nearly collides with MARIA BARBARA.

BACH

Oh, dear. I'm sorry you had to witness this little fracas. My assistant has left me for another post, and my patience has reached its limit with the boys’ choir. May I introduce myself? My name is Johann Sebastian Bach.

He bows, she curtsies, amused now.

MARIA

I’m sorry to intrude, Herr Bach. But I believe I left my handkerchief in the church pew.

BACH

Then I shall retrieve it, fair maiden -- post haste!

Bach turns to Center Stage, poised to hurry off.

MARIA

No. Please. That won’t be necessary. I’ll just—

BACH

Pardon my boldness for saying so, but I could swear we have met before – if only in my dreams.

Maria LAUGHS.

MARIA

I don’t believe we have, Herr Bach. But I cannot account for my whereabouts in other people’s dreams. MY name is also Bach. Maria Barbara Bach.

BACH

(excitedly)

Then I was right. I do know you. The family reunions. Your parents often came to my father's home in Eisenach. You're my second cousin.

MARIA

But that was ages ago.

BACH

You wore long braided pig-tails.

Maria LAUGHS.

MARIA

With pink ribbons. My mother insisted. Then it’s no wonder that you play the organ so beautifully. Your family was always so gifted.

BACH

Thank you. But I am also the one who instructs the abysmal boys’ choir you must bear with every Sunday.

Maria LAUGHS again.

MARIA

Ah, yes, the village boys. They don't always appreciate God's finer gifts. I should think I would lose patience myself.

BACH

Do you sing?

MARIA

Yes, I do. In the town chorus.

BACH

Then indulge me. I have just completed a duet for a new cantata, and I'm afraid I can't quite sing both voices. Would you join me in the choir loft?

She looks nervously about the empty church and into the audience.

MARIA

Are ladies permitted there?

BACH

According to the new rules established by the choir master himself - yes.

She LAUGHS SOFTLY as Bach takes her hand and they ascend to the choir loft, where Bach hands her the sheet music and sits at the organ.

He plays a soft introduction on the organ before Maria's lovely soprano voice launches into [CHRIST LAG IN TODESBANDEN](https://youtu.be/Z0PVBN_BPQU?t=30) and intertwines with Bach’s rich tenor until...

MAN’S STERN VOICE (O.S)

 (shouting)

Herr Bach, may I speak with you?

Maria and Bach stop singing and stare at one another.

MAN’S STERN VOICE (O.S)

Alone?

Maria quickly descends the stairs and exits Stage Right. Bach comes to Center Stage. Spotlight on.

MAN’S STERN VOICE (O.S)

So, Herr Bach, your relations with your charges have so deteriorated that you now engage them in brawling -- and in God’s domain? I saw you with Thomas earlier.

BACH

But, Reverend, he shows no respect for my authority—

MAN’S STERN VOICE (O.S)

Herr Bach, if you cannot keep order in the choir without resorting to insults, then I suggest you seek another post. “Like a braying nanny-goat”?

BACH

I might have said far worse under the circumstances.

MAN’S STERN VOICE (O.S)

I fear your outbursts have more to do with YOUR temperament than THEIR conduct.

BACH

But, sir, they refuse to bend to the task.

MAN’S STERN VOICE (O.S)

Man is NOT perfect, Herr Bach. Especially young men.

BACH

May I point out, Reverend, that with my assistant Andreas gone to another position, I am forced to be both organist and choirmaster - at the same pay. It is a violation of my contract.

MAN’S STERN VOICE (O.S)

Might I also point out that your contract says nothing about entertaining certain strange maidens in the choir loft.

BACH

She is not a “strange maiden.” She is-

MAN’S STERN VOICE (O.S)

Tut, tut. You are a very talented young man, Herr Bach. But there is more to learn in life than music.

BACH

Music is not my life. God is my life, and music is how I know best to find Him in my soul.

MAN’S STERN VOICE (O.S)

The path to God is through his sacred Word, Herr Bach. I suggest you start reading your Bible.

BACH

I do, Reverend, but it is not the same.

MAN’S STERN VOICE (O.S.)

Tut, tut. I’ll hear no more. You are skirting the edge of heresy, Herr Bach.

LIGHTS FADE.

Move to Stage Left, night.

SCENE 6

In the lamp glow, Bach and Maria stand face-to-face outside the doorway to Maria’s home. At Center Stage, someone lurks in the shadows.

MARIA

My father has asked where I’ve been spending all my time of late. And with whom. I told him he has nothing to worry about. I’m in the company of the church organist.

They LAUGH.

BACH

As for me, I have all but forgotten my troubles with the choir. You have brought such joy into my life, Maria.

MARIA

Have I? And you for me, dear Sebastian. But you must be careful. Thomas is a known ruffian. I know his family. They live not far from here.

Bach pats the sword in his belt.

BACH

Then it is well that I am prepared at all times.

MARIA

(with concern)

Surely, it won't come to that, Sebastian. Besides, with your talents, you needn’t work in a little village like ours.

Sebastian looks deep into her eyes.

BACH

And leave thee behind?

Bach clasps his hands to her face, she closes her eyes. There’s a breathless moment as he parts his lips, pulls her close for their first kiss when-

A masked man emerges from the shadows wielding a long stick in both hands. Maria gasps as Bach wheels and pulls his sword. The masked man advances.

MASKED MAN (THOMAS)

"Nanny-goat" is it? Let's hear you say it again.

He takes a wild swing at Bach's head - Maria SCREAMS – but misses as Bach ducks. Bach thrusts with his sword, Thomas deflects it, and the two square off again.

MARIA

Both of you, stop! Someone will be killed!

Maria steps between the two men, but Thomas casts her aside to the ground. Thomas lunges again but Bach knocks the stick from his hand with his sword. Thomas reaches for the stick but stops as Bach puts his blade to Thomas’s neck.

BACH

Flee now while there is still mercy in my heart.

Bach sheathes his sword, but Thomas quickly grabs his stick, stands again and strikes Bach across the side of his head. Bach falls to the ground. There is blood on his head and face

Maria comes to his aid as Thomas exits Stage Right. She kneels and caresses Bach’s face, dabbing at the blood with her hankie.

MARIA

Sebastian! My dear, Sebastian!

Bach suddenly pulls her close and kisses her. It’s long and passionate. Both are silent a moment as they part.

BACH

(sotto voce)

Maria, dearest, will you be my bride?

Maria smiles into eyes.

MARIA

Poor, Sebastian. If you could see your face . . .

BACH

Maria, you must. I cannot go on living without you.

MARIA

That is quite a lot of responsibility. But... we shall see.

LIGHTS FADE.

Return to Stage Right.

BACH

God of Mercy, take pity one me. For in the end, I betrayed my beloved Maria -- just as I betrayed your sacred music. And for what? For sheer vanity and the empty pleasures of the flesh.

Move to Center Stage, Study.

SCENE 7

Bach sits at his desk, looking careworn and tired, as he composes. Soon we hear the ruckus of small boys chasing each other and SCREAMING off stage.

CHILDREN’S VOICES (O.S.)

”It’s mine!”

“No, it isn’t! You gave it to me!”

“No, I didn’t. Give it back!”

BACH

Maria! Maria!

MARIA comes from Stage Left, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

MARIA

Yes, dear.

BACH

How can I possibly work with all this cacophony!

Maria SIGHS.

MARIA

I’ll talk to the boys. But you worry me, Sebastian. You look as gloaming as the mid-winter sky. Has the Duke demanded another High Mass for the weekend?

Bach stands and turns from her.

BACH

I'm afraid it's much worse.

MARIA

(teasing)

He is taking up yet another instrument?

Bach turns to her and slams his fist into his palm.

BACH

He has passed me by for capellmeister!

MARIA

But how? He promised you that position from the very start.

BACH

And like any tyrant, he reserves the right to change his mind. He has instead bequeathed it to the capellmeister’s son

- "as befits tradition," he informed me. My God, Maria, I am tired of being a slave to that man.

Maria goes to Bach and hugs him.

MARIA

Then let us go elsewhere. I have never felt quite at ease here, not since the loss of the twins. The Duke's physician leaves much to be desired.

Bach kisses her forehead, tenderly.

MARIA (CONT’D)

What of Prince Leopold - hasn't he long admired your work?

BACH

But he is a man of the world and has no use for sacred music. His may be a different trap, I fear.

MARIA

You have always said that music - all worthy music - is a path to the divine. Why should it matter if you write for church or for prince?

BACH

Ah, Maria. You and I have always been of one mind.

MARIA

And body, my dear.

Bach LAUGHS and enfolds her in his arms.

BACH (CONT’D)

Then I will write the prince. I only pray that my heart remains as pure as thine.

LIGHTS FADE.

We hear the majestic strains of [THE SECOND BRANDENBURG CONCERTO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdfI8NOZvmY) as the action moves to Stage Left.

SCENE 8

PRINCE LEOPOLD - young, wigless and slightly unctuous – and a DOORMAN stand by the entrance to the palace as Bach and Maria emerge from a coach.

Bach bows and Maria curtsies. Leopold shakes hands with Bach. The doorman removes their luggage from the coach and takes it inside.

LEOPOLD

Herr Bach, I am thrilled that someone of your great talent may finally grace my court.

He turns to Maria, takes her hand and kisses it.

LEOPOLD

And unless this is your daughter, Herr Bach, it must be the lovely Frau Bach.

MARIA

Indeed, Your Highness. I am flattered, but I fear you might be in need of an oculist.

The Prince LAUGHS HAUGHTILY, then turns to the doorman.

LEOPOLD

See to it that Frau Bach finds the family quarters for her inspection. I would like to discuss terms with Herr Bach.

The DOORMAN shepherds Maria inside.

LEOPOLD (CONT’D)

As I wrote you, Herr Bach, there will be little church music among your duties - only that you accompany the chorales in Sunday chapel. Mostly you will prepare concerts for our musical evenings here at the palace, in which I myself often participate. As well as playing violin and harpsichord - quite competently, I am told - I am blessed with an engaging baritone voice.

Leopold DELICATELY CLEARS HIS THROAT.

BACH

So, I have heard, Your Highness.

LEOPOLD

Yes, well of course. But once on stage, you mustn't stand on protocol. Treat me as you would any other musician. Are we in agreement on that?

BACH

But, of course. As you wish, Your Highness.

LEOPOLD

We have 18 well-trained musicians in our orchestra and the finest instruments, although the harpsichord is now a bit aged and wanting. I have plans for you to purchase a new one, in Berlin. I will pay you twice the salary you received from the Duke’s pathetic coffers. Are those terms acceptable, Herr Bach?

BACH

They are most generous, your excellency. I am honored to serve someone with such talent and exquisite taste in music.

LEOPOLD

You flatter me, Herr Bach. Then it shall be so.

LIGHTS FADE.

Move to Center Stage, Church setting.

SCENE 9

Bach, Maria, and Prince Leopold are gathered round a baptismal font. Maria sways the newly baptized infant Leopold in her arms, trying to comfort him as he SQUALLS.

MARIA

Oh, dear. Baptism seems to have frightened both child and devil.

The young prince reaches for the infant.

 LEOPOLD

Permit me, Frau Bach.

The Prince places the baby over his shoulder and pats him lightly. Like magic, the baby quiets.

BACH

You have a gift, Your Highness. Perhaps you will be blessed someday with children of your own.

LEOPOLD

Until that day, my little namesake here will do quite nicely.

MARIA

We are honored, Your Highness, that you asked to be his godfather.

LEOPOLD

It is I who am honored - if he grows up to be half the musician of his father.

MARIA

(gravely)

I wish only that God keep him healthy. Sebastian and I have had so many losses through the years. It seems we can never feel safe until they take their first steps.

Bach folds an arm around her shoulders.

BACH

Be strong in your faith, darling. Besides, our Leopold has a prince for his godfather. What harm can come of him?

Prince Leopold smiles at the baby again.

LEOPOLD

Indeed, little Leopold. I shall be your guardian angel.

LIGHTS FADE.

Move to Stage Right, where Bach has paused his organ playing.

BACH

It was in Leopold’s court in Coethen that I wrote three concerti that I had thought, in the throes of my vanity, would carry my name throughout Europe. Perhaps even to the great Handel in London. I dedicated the pieces to another admirer of mine, the Margrave of Brandenburg.

I received a brief note from the Margrave’s concertmaster, thanking me for my contribution. But to my knowledge, the concerti have never been performed. Thus is the reward for my vanity. And yet my son, who defies and scoffs at me, is far more famous than I. Is it jealousy that now consumes me? Of all my children, why was I so strict and unforgiving with Carl? Was it because he was so like me? Or was it because he, too, realized the sin that was deep within me.

Move to Center Stage, Study.

SCENE 10

Bach sets up a music stand next to his desk and arranges music there. He stops and looks at the clock on his desk. He goes to the door, opens it.

BACH

(shouting)

Carl!

There’s no response.

BACH (CONT’D)

Carl, it is time for your violin lesson! Do you hear me?!

CARL (O.S. defiantly)

Yes. I’m coming.

BACH

Come hither, young man. I haven’t all day.

CARL’S VOICE O.S.

Is it that same old Italian piece?

BACH

The Cima? Yes, of course. It has all the fingering you need for practice.

CARL’S VOICE O.S.

But can’t I play something more modern? I am so tired of Cima and the horrid Italians.

BACH

Carl, practice is not meant to entertain you. It’s meant to sharpen your skills. Now come here before I lose my patience.

CARL’S VOICE O.S.

No! I won’t. You’ll have to beat me.

BACH

Carl, I command you to come here immediately!

(He slaps his hand against the door frame.)

Maria!

MARIA’S VOICE (O.S.)

(with baby crying in background)

Yes, dear!

BACH

May I talk to you a moment, please?

Maria arrives in the doorway, looking exhausted, infant Leopold WAILING in her arms. She turns side to side to comfort him.

BACH

Carl refuses now to practice his violin. What am I to do with the boy?

MARIA

He lacks nothing in talent, dear. You know that. But he complains that you don’t challenge him. Can’t you bend a little and let him play something that interests him?

BACH

Bend? It seems bending is all we do anymore. The boys come and go and do almost as they please.

MARIA

I’m sorry, dear. But Leopold has been so fussy of late. He consumes all my time and attention.

She gives the baby a look of concern.

BACH

What about Catharina? Can’t she look after her brothers?

MARIA

She tries, but they’re a handful for someone so young.

Bach picks up the music from the music stand.

BACH

More modern? He hasn’t even mastered the traditional works yet. The pride and stubbornness of that boy!

MARIA

Quite frankly, Sebastian, he reminds me of a certain someone I know.

BACH

He does? Well, he has a great deal more practicing to do before he’ll be a musician worthy of the name Bach.

The baby starts CRYING AGAIN, LOUDER THIS TIME.

BACH

Just put him to bed, Maria. Don’t indulge him.

MARIA

But he hasn’t been nursing.

BACH

He’ll be hungry soon enough. Put him to bed and try to rest, my dear. You’re exhausting yourself.

MARIA

I would give up all sleep if only he would suckle.

Still rocking a crying Leopold, Maria turns and exits.

Bach stares after them with concern.

LIGHTS FADE.

BACH

Why hast Thou taken so many of my children? Do you love them so much more than I? How do we, the living, make sense of so much death? I beg you in the name of Jesus for an answer. HOW?!

The action moves to Center Stage, Bedroom, night.

SCENE 11

Bach lies sleeping alone in bed when Maria, dressed in a pure white robe and holding a silent Leopold in her arms, opens the bedroom door and walks in, zombie-like, and stands at the foot of the bed.

MARIA

(almost a whisper)

Sebastian.

Bach stirs, instinctively reaches over to the other side of the bed, where Maria is missing.

MARIA

Sebastian.

He sits upright in bed.

BACH

Maria, what are you doing up?

(Pause)

Is Leopold all right?

Maria SOBS.

BACH

Maria, tell me it’s not so.

Bach gets out of bed and goes to Maria, where he reaches out for the baby. But Maria pulls back and holds the baby tighter.

MARIA

No! I bore him. Only I will hold him in death.

 (continues through SOBS)

Why, Sebastian? Why does God take away what he has given? Why?

BACH

Maria, it is not for us to judge the ways of the Lord.

MARIA

The ways of Lord? To kill the weak and the innocent?

BACH

You mustn’t blaspheme, my darling. Let us go to chapel and pray.

Bach reaches again for the baby but Maria clasps him tighter and turns away.

MARIA

No, I will NOT pray. Not to a God who is so cruel.

BACH

Maria, please. You are out of your mind with grief.

MARIA

Yes. And I care not what happens to my soul.

Maria clutches the baby even more tightly, turns and runs off stage.

LIGHTS FADE.

The [PASSACAGLIA SWELLS IN THE DRAMATIC NINTH THROUGH ELEVENTH VARIATIONS](https://youtu.be/FpZfvlWJbjg?t=368) (6:08 to 6:52), a rage of notes rising, swirling, and descending to hell, then fade as the action moves to Center Stage, Music Hall.

SCENE 12

Bach sits at the clavichord with Prince Leopold, violin in hand, standing nearby. Both are looking over sheets of music.

LEOPOLD

I am most excited about tonight's performance, Sebastian. Your violin concerto will do us all proud. I can only pray that I live up to my own small role in the entertainment. I do so hope to make a good impression on the Duke and Duchess.

BACH

(without enthusiasm)

You needn't worry, Your Highness. You have never failed to make a good impression on anyone.

LEOPOLD

Dear Sebastian, are you still so sad? I had hoped that our little trip here to Carlsbad would revive your spirits.

BACH

Through no fault of your own, sire. I feel as though I should not have left Maria at home. It’s been almost a year since Leopold’s death, and yet she remains so distant. It's as if I lost both child and wife.

LEOPOLD

I have yet to have children, Sebastian, so I cannot speak for your loss, nor less a mother’s. I miss little Leopold, too, but I know in my heart he is quite happy to be so near to God.

BACH

And what of us? Is God so selfish that He cannot share what He has brought into the world?

LEOPOLD

I am not a religious man, Sebastian, but I know only a fool tries to discern the will of God. Leave matters of the cosmos to Him, and the living to us. We have but two nights left at the resort, Sebastian. Let us make the most of them.

Bach takes a deep breath and SIGHS.

BACH

It's not that I don't appreciate your generosity, sire. But something seems amiss - terribly amiss - about my presence here.

LEOPOLD

Sebastian, for you things shall always seem amiss. In three days’ time, we shall be home. Now, I suggest we treat ourselves to a relaxing massage before the concert. I have a servant, Herr Bach, who will show you some very special attention.

Leopold winks knowingly and snaps his fingers.

He exits Stage Right as a scantily-clad SERVANT GIRL in a face veil enters Stage Left and takes Bach by the hand. She places his hand on her face and nuzzles his palm, then pulls down her veil and kisses him full on the mouth. Bach stands transfixed, as though paralyzed. She cups his hand to her breast and leads him by the hand toward Stage Left.

LIGHTS FADE.

SCENE 13

Bach alights from the coach façade on Stage Left at night and looks guiltily at the lighted window in the apartment above.

BACH

(sotto voce)

The sinner returns, like a thief in the night.

Catharina, a teenager, comes outside in her night robe, a lighted candle in her hand.

CATHARINA (tearfully)

Oh, Father, we tried to reach you in Carlsbad. . .

BACH

About what, my dear?

CATHARINA

Father, it happened so suddenly . . .

Bach moves to CENTER STAGE, into the dark and unlit parlor, where there is a casket in shadow.

BACH (shouting)

Maria!

CARL, backlit, stands at an open door.

CARL

Where were you, Father? Where were you? Mother was calling for you and you didn’t care. I hate you, Father! I hate you!

Carl turns and disappears.

BACH

Carl, no! Please!

(Bach looks about the darkened room.)

Maria!? Where are you?

Catharina enters the parlor with her candle. The lights rise on Center Stage, where Maria lies in an open casket.

Bach holds his head between his hands as though it will burst.

BACH

(tortured)

No! Maria!

Bach throws himself on Maria’s body, WEEPING, then gets to his knees, hands folded in prayer.

BACH

God in your great mercy, forgive me. Please forgive me.

Bach buries his face in his hands and WEEPS.

LIGHTS FADE.

CURTAIN DOWN.

ACT II

SCENE 1

Action opens on Stage Right, where Bach plays the organ as the PASSACAGLIA rises to a crescendo and a climactic closing in the [17TH THROUGH 20TH VARIATIONS](https://youtu.be/FpZfvlWJbjg?t=436). (7:16 to 8:03)

Bach attacks the organ with the energy of a much younger man, as though wrestling with God Himself for an answer until the FINAL ELONGATED NOTE and stops, drained. Then silence until . . .

BACH

(just above a whisper)

It was as if I had killed her with my own hands. How could you or anyone forgive me? And yet, in your divine mercy, you sent me Anna. Why? How could that be?

Bach slowly begins playing the [OPENING EXPOSITION OF THE FUGUE](https://youtu.be/FpZfvlWJbjg?t=488)

[PORTION](https://youtu.be/FpZfvlWJbjg?t=488) (8:08 to 9:16) of the Passacaglia, a series of soft, rising, hopeful notes in counterpoint...

LIGHTS FADE.

MUSIC CONTINUES, then fades as the action opens on Center Stage, Music Hall.

SCENE 2

ANNA Magdalena Wolcken, 20, beautiful and radiant in her performance robe, stands nervously facing the audience.

Standing beside her is Prince Leopold while Bach, 36, sits at the clavichord.

LEOPOLD

(to the theater audience)

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a rare treat that I offer you as we close our concert tonight. Fraulein Wolcken, the daughter of our esteemed court trumpeter, has offered to entertain us with her most lovely voice. It is her debut performance.

APPLAUSE from the audience.

Bach reassures Anna with a quick nod. She smiles back and, when Bach cues her, begins singing Martini's ["PLAISIR D'AMOUR"](https://youtu.be/kOCwZ67uwQc?t=25) in a sweet, young voice that draws a smile from Leopold...

Anna finishes with a resounding flourish and EAGER APPLAUSE from the audience follows.

Bach, too, raises his clenched hands and Anna returns the gesture by blowing him a kiss. Bach, embarrassed, looks away.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action returns to Center Stage, where Bach is gathering up the music sheets from his clavichord in preparation for leaving.

Anna enters from Stage Right and shyly approaches him.

ANNA

I wanted to thank you for making tonight so gratifying, Herr Bach. I had feared my debut would be a disaster.

Bach busies himself shuffling papers, ruffled by the attentions of someone so young and beautiful.

BACH

Nonsense, Fraulein. You have only your talent to thank.

ANNA

But you gave me something I lacked.

BACH

You lack nothing in either virtuosity or dedication to your craft.

ANNA

But you gave me confidence, Herr Bach - your faith in me.

Bach is so flustered he drops the stack of sheet music in his hands and watches the pages scatter across the floor.

ANNA

Oh, dear!

She stoops to help, but Bach waves her away.

BACH

No, no. You must go with your father. I can attend to this.

But as her lovely face rises, their eyes meet for a moment, and Bach is startled to realize that this beautiful young woman, little more than half his age, is enamored of him.

BACH (CONT’D)

Perhaps we shall have the chance to work together - again, I mean.

She smiles coyly.

ANNA

Soon - I pray.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action moves to Center Stage, Study.

SCENE 3

Bach and the Prince are smoking pipes, glancing over the sheet music together for an upcoming concert. The Prince smirks.

LEOPOLD

I see you have written a part here for a voice soprano. Would you by any chance have Fraulein Wolcken in mind?

Bach buries his face in the music.

BACH

If she so chooses to do us the honor.

LEOPOLD

Us, Sebastian?

Bach looks up, genuinely puzzled.

BACH

I am simply the music director. It is your court, Your Highness.

LEOPOLD

But it is for you that she sings,

(chuckling)

AND with such adoring eyes.

BACH

I'm not sure what you mean, sire.

LEOPOLD

Oh, come, come, Sebastian. You have been widowed now a year. Surely you are not so dead to the world.

BACH

She is but seven years older than my daughter Catharina.

LEOPOLD

So? A young woman in her prime. You, old man, are what - 35?

BACH

Soon to be 36.

The Prince puffs on his pipe, shrugs. He looks distracted.

LEOPOLD

Have you thought of asking her father for her hand?

Bach is genuinely flustered now. He knocks the ash from his pipe into a nearby bowl, then stuffs it with fresh tobacco.

BACH

There has been so much of death in my life. I would be bringing my winter to her spring and killing all the bloom.

LEOPOLD

Quite the contrary, Sebastian. She will turn your winter into spring, and you will bloom again. Not so?

BACH

It is in God's hands.

LEOPOLD

Think of your children. Certainly, they would want a woman in the household again. And you a young wife. Not so?

Bach frowns as he puffs.

BACH

I have tried not to dwell on such matters, your excellency.

LEOPOLD

(grinning)

Sebastian. We are both men. And as a man, and as your friend, I would advise you not to discourage the attentions of young Anna Magdalena.

BACH

If that is your wish, sire.

The Prince CHUCKLES OUT LOUD, full of himself.

LEOPOLD

No, it is my command.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action moves to Center Stage, Dining Room.

SCENE 4

Bach and Anna are seated at the dinner table, Bach at the head and Anna next to him. They hold hands

Catharina, standing, pours wine into Anna’s glass.

ANNA

Thank you, Catharina. And thank you so much for the lovely meal you prepared for all of us tonight.

CATHARINA

It was nothing, Fraulein Wilcken. If I had known that Father and you were going to announce your engagement, I would have made something far more special for the occasion. I’m so happy for the both of you.

ANNA

Thank you, Catharina. But you must call me Anna from now on.

CATHARINA

With pleasure, Anna.

Bach shakes his head.

BACH

Ah, but the boys tonight. . .

ANNA

The boys will come around, Sebastian. This is all so new to them.

BACH

There was no excuse for their ill-mannered responses this evening, particularly Carl. Leaving the table without being excused, his dinner half-eaten. He is NOT the master of this house.

Bach BANGS his fist on the table.

ANNA

Surely, he will learn that best if you rule with your heart and not your fist.

She takes his hand and kisses it.

CATHARINA

It has been a long while since we’ve had a mother’s touch in this house. Wouldn’t you agree, Father?

BACH

Indeed, Catharina.

ANNA

It will take time, especially with the boys. Such an aching void to fill.

BACH

If anyone can fill that void, it’s you, darling.

CATHARINA

And I agree.

BACH

A toast then.

They all raise their glasses.

BACH (CONT’D)

To Anna Magdalena and a new heart for our family.

LIGHTS FADE.

We hear the opening notes of [“SHEEP MAY SAFELY GRAZE”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VzaCZH1zGvw) (First 16 seconds) as the action moves to Center Stage, Bedroom.

SCENE 5

Anna sings ["SHEEP MAY SAFELY GRAZE"](https://youtu.be/VzaCZH1zGvw?t=17) as she brushes out her hair in the mirror. Bach stands behind her, watching, enthralled. Both are in nightclothes. As Anna finishes the final note, Bach caresses her shoulders.

BACH

Such peace and joy no man deserves.

Anna stands, turns and they kiss.

ANNA

(teasingly)

You are no ordinary man.

BACH

If in thine eyes only, it is enough.

ANNA

I have a small confession to make, darling. About the behavior of the boys today.

BACH

Dear God, what now?

ANNA

Carl broke his violin bow this morning. He blamed Wilhelm, of course, for sitting on it. Wilhelm says Carl broke it swatting at flies.

BACH

Ah, there you have it.

ANNA

Carl was afraid you would beat him if you found out. So I told him I would replace his bow with one my father has, but on one condition. That he perform his most difficult piece for my father.

BACH

And did he?

ANNA

Beautifully. Would you agree that was punishment enough?

BACH

Yes. And I must admit, your womanly ways with the boys have been very successful.

ANNA

And with you?

BACH

I am mere putty in your hands, my dear.

They kiss and Bach blows out the candle when, suddenly, there’s a small knock at the door. They are both somewhat startled.

ANNA

Yes?

CARL’S VOICE (O.S.)

Mother. I mean, Anna. It’s me, Carl.

ANNA

Yes, dear. Come in.

Carl stands in shadow at the open door.

CARL

I can’t sleep. Could you come sing for me?

Anna and Bach exchange smiles.

ANNA

Yes, dear. Now return to bed and I’ll be up in a minute.

CARL

Would you sing that French song I like so much?

ANNA

Plaisir d’Amour? Why of course, sweetheart.

CARL

Thank you, Mother.

Carl turns and disappears.

Anna turns to Bach.

ANNA

Like father, like son.

They both LAUGH.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action remains on Center Stage, Study.

SCENE 6

BACH is reading a letter at his desk when Anna opens the door with a breakfast. He turns and smiles in greeting.

BACH

Thank you, dear. The boys are off to school?

Anna sets the tray on his desk.

ANNA

Yes, minutes ago. I would have brought them in to say goodbye, but I didn’t want to disturb your work.

Bach shrugs and sets down his letter.

BACH

And what work might that be? The Prince has not requested a concert in months.

ANNA

(smiling knowingly)

He is newly wed, Sebastian. The prince has interests other than music - for now.

Bach shakes his head and sighs.

BACH

I fear it is his bride who has other interests, and he has abandoned his own for the sake of hers.

Anna lays a hand on Bach’s shoulder.

ANNA

Perhaps you are too hasty in your judgment.

BACH

The princess herself has told me that all this music is a nuisance. That I am a nuisance - in so many words. The only question now is where I might find another position.

ANNA

But the children, Sebastian. They do so love it here.

BACH

I have been thinking of their futures as well. Here they have no possibility of attending university - unless, by some miracle, we should find means to pay their room and board. I've told you many times I don't wish my children to suffer, as I have, for lack of an education.

ANNA

They could do far worse than to follow in your footsteps.

BACH

And far better.

Bach shows her the letter he has been reading.

BACH (CONT’D)

I have word from my cousin in Leipzig. He informs me that Herr Kuhnau has vacated the post of cantor at St. Thomas.

Anna's eyes light up.

ANNA

Leipzig? What a splendid city, Sebastian!

BACH

And with an excellent university - one of the finest in Prussia.

ANNA

But, Sebastian, you said the position is only for cantor. Here you are capellmeister.

Bach shrugs. Anna looks him in the eye.

ANNA (CONT’D)

I know you want what is best for the children, Sebastian, but you mustn't betray your talent.

He takes her hands.

BACH

But there will be other compensations, my dear - the chance to write sacred music again! I have become so caught up here in the vanities of men. I wish to return to making music for God, and God alone.

Anna kisses his forehead.

ANNA

Then we must go.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action moves to Stage Left, Street Exterior, as [“ART THOU WITH ME”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4quwZwl9rk) begins to play in the background.

SCENE 7

"ART THOU WITH ME" continues as

Anna, holding a small baby, and Bach, carrying two suitcases, enter their new apartment at Center Stage. The room is bare, dusty, full of cobwebs. There’s a dirty fireplace, simple wooden table, some flimsy chairs.

BACH

What I disaster. Thank God we waited on bringing the children.

ANNA

(gamely, looking around)

I guess it could do with a little brightening.

Bach parts the ragged curtains on a latticed window.

BACH (CONT’D)

Look, dear! What a magnificent view. You can see the sun setting over the Pleisse River. Like a Flemish painting.

Anna joins him, nods approvingly. She looks about the room.

ANNA

I'll make it quite livable, you'll see, darling.

Bach kisses her forehead.

BACH

I have no doubts.

From the next room comes the MUFFLED SOUND of an OLDER MAN'S THREATENING VOICE and the THWACK OF A CANE, followed by a BOY'S SCREAMS. Bach, concerned, puts his ear to the wall.

BACH (CONT’D)

I believe it's the rector - beating one of the boys.

The BEATING CONTINUES until the baby in Anna's arms BEGINS TO CRY. Bach raises a fist, considers pounding on the wall, but the sound stops, followed by the DRONING VOICE again.

Then an eerie silence.

Anna looks at Bach and shivers.

BACH (CONT’D)

I’m going to find out what’s happening.

He heads to the door but, when he opens it, Johann Heinrich ERNST, a sour old man of 71, is standing there about to knock with his cane. Bach stares at him.

ERNST

May I come in?

BACH

(recovering)

Yes, of course. And you are?

He limps in, cane in hand, and doesn’t bother to shake Bach’s hand.

ERNST

Johann Ernst, I’m the rector here. And I take it you are Herr and Frau Bach?

BACH

Yes. We just came to look at our quarters today.

ERNST

Sorry about the condition. I was going to have one of the students come in and clean today, but plum forgot. You know how it is at my age.

BACH

Would you care to sit?

ERNST

Not sure I’d trust those chairs. You got furniture of you own?

BACH

Yes. It will be arriving tomorrow, along with our children. May I ask what all that noise was earlier?

ERNST

What noise?

BACH

It sounded like a beating.

ERNST

Oh, that. One of the boys broke his chamber pot. You have to keep them in line. Especially the scholarship boys. They never come from the proper families.

BACH

I was a scholarship student.

ERNST

(smiling, but cowered)

You don’t say. Well, you seem to have turned out all right.

BACH

And I was never beaten.

Bach stares him down.

ERNST

Well, just thought I’d introduce myself. I’ll have one of the students come and clean up.

He starts limping toward the door.

ANNA

That won’t be necessary, Herr Ernst. I’ll attend to the cleaning.

ERNST

That’s so? Well, have it your way.

Bach opens the door for him and nearly slams it as Ernst exits.

BACH

What chamber of hell have we landed in?

LIGHTS FADE.

Action moves to Stage Right.

Bach reaches the [FIFTH EPISODE OF THE FUGUE](https://youtu.be/FpZfvlWJbjg?t=500) (Ending at 9:01), a more strident and suspenseful part of the PASSACAGLIA, his tired face gathering an icy resolve as his fingers hammer at the keys.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action remains at Center Stage but rotates to Bach’s study.

SCENE 8

The once barren room is now warm and inviting, with bright pictures on the walls, lace curtains in the windows, lots of beloved old furniture and musical instruments. Anna sits nearby doing needlework, as Bach writes furiously at his desk.

BACH

The King must be informed of the wretched conditions here. I cannot teach children who shiver all night and starve by day. You should see the slop they serve them, the meager portions! I will send this letter by post immediately...

He's interrupted by the SHOUTING OF ERNST in the room next door and, again, the CRACK OF A CANE. Bach tosses his quill pen on the desk in disgust.

BACH (CONT’D)

Anna, why in God's name did I come here? Is this to be my final station in life - this... this juvenile prison?

ANNA

We were brought here for a reason, Sebastian, I am certain of it. Just as certain that I loved you the first time I sang for you. Do you remember?

Bach at last smiles, tenderly.

BACH

I was blind to your affections then.

ANNA

Perhaps you are just as blind now to God's purpose.

BACH

My faith should be half so strong as yours.

ANNA

It is not a matter of faith, Sebastian. I feel it.

(She places a hand over her breast.)

Here in my heart - a peace I cannot explain. We belong here, Sebastian. Something tells me it must be so.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action moves to Stage Right while Center Stage rotates to Church set.

SCENE 9

Bach is standing with a baton in the organ loft conducting the unseen choir and orchestra as we hear "ST. MATTHEW'S PASSION" break into its rousing 67th chorus, ["DER DU DEN TEMPEL GOTTES ZERBRICHTS."](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sKrrJrS94Y)

The PASTOR stands patiently by the pulpit at Center Stage, hands folded, while standing in the shadows Stage Right is a YOUNG PRINCE FREDERICK, 15, disguised in simple garb.

When the piece concludes, Bach looks exhausted, drained, as though the music had been a catharsis for everything that has happened to him since coming to Leipzig.

PASTOR

Go now, in the peace and love of Christ. This Easter service has ended.

Bach descends the staircase when, suddenly, young PRINCE FREDERICK walks out of the shadows and begins to APPLAUD LOUDLY. Bach, embarrassed and flustered, is greeted by Frederick.

PRINCE FREDERICK

Herr Bach, your Mass exceeded even my own high expectations. It was perhaps the most sublime music I have ever heard.

BACH

Thank you for the kind words, young man, but all glory must go to our Lord’s sacrifice upon the cross.

PRINCE FREDERICK

Indeed. And if I were a religious man, the music would have moved me to my very soul.

BACH

Excuse me, but have we met before?

The Prince extends his hand and shows Bach his royal ring.

PRINCE FREDERICK

I am Prince Frederick.

BACH

(agitated)

Your Highness, I had no idea. Please forgive my impertinence.

He bows and kisses the ring.

PRINCE FREDERICK

It’s perfectly understandable, given my wardrobe, Herr Bach.

BACH

But why thus, Your Highness?

PRINCE FREDERICK

The King detests music. To him it embodies all that is weak and effeminate and, God help us, French.

BACH

But my music is meant only to give praise to God. I mean no harm to the crown.

PRINCE FREDERICK

Praise to God, indeed. I must admit, as someone who abhors religion, I found myself tonight thinking how faith has inspired such beauty over the centuries. Masterworks of art. Great cathedrals. And your own music, Herr Bach.

BACH

Your Highness, I'm at a loss for words.

PRINCE FREDERICK

Don't be. I only wish I could provide the world with something of equal beauty.

Bach bows to the prince.

BACH

Do not think me presumptuous, Your Highness. But there is something you could do to help the young students here at St. Thomas.

PRINCE FREDERICK

You realize I am not yet king, Herr Bach.

BACH

Indeed, sire. But I have written many times to your father and have received no reply from his great office. The rector here is extremely cruel to the students. He beats and starves them. Their only hope is that a new rector be appointed - one who has compassion for the young.

The prince rubs the peach fuzz on his chin.

PRINCE FREDERICK

My time is not yet at hand, Herr Bach. But I promise to look into this matter. You should not be diverting your talents with such concerns.

Bach bows again and the prince extends his ring. Bach kisses it and stands back.

BACH

I am in your debt, Your Highness. And I pray that your father will someday come to appreciate the great gift that God has given us in His music.

PRINCE FREDERICK

(grinning)

I should think the king would rather burn in hell.

LIGHTS FADE.

Center Stage rotates to Dormitory Room, dimly lit.

SCENE 10

Both dressed in winter coats, Bach leads his old school friend ANDREAS, the new rector, through the dormitory by lantern light, past the students (mannequins) jammed in cots under thin blankets. We hear a RECORDING OF COUGHING in the cold room. Bach picks up a water pitcher from a nearby wash table and turns it upside down. Nothing comes out.

BACH

Frozen.

ANDREAS

(SIGHING, then whispering)

The conditions are even more dire than I had imagined from your letter, Sebastian. I will talk to the Town Council first thing in the morning.

Bach wraps his arm in a warm hug around Andreas's shoulders.

BACH

Andreas, you are the answer to my prayers. To think that one of my dearest friends should follow on the heels of that tyrant.

ANDREAS

You had much to do with that, Sebastian. Not many people gain the ear of the king.

Andreas places his cape gently over one of the boys.

ANDREAS (CONT’D)

As God is my witness, we shall make this a school worthy of these suffering children.

BACH

(teasingly)

You dance, I play.

ANDREAS

And both of us shall pass the hat.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action moves to Stage Right, where Bach pauses from his playing and smiles wearily at the memory.

BACH

I was so eager to give my children the university education I never had. But I never dreamed that by doing so I would turn Carl against me. That I would become the unschooled bumpkin in his eyes.

Scene 11

At Center Stage is a coffee house with a dais and some small tables and chairs. Bach, in his late 40s, and Andreas sit at a table while his daughter Catharina, 19, [SINGS THE LIVELY PART OF LIESCHEN](https://youtu.be/gL-ZkWzeGaY?t=28), the wayward daughter addicted to coffee, from Bach’s COFFEE CANTATA. When she finishes, she bows from the dais and the audience, along with Bach and Andreas, APPLAUD VIGOROUSLY.

Andreas helps seat Catharina at their table.

ANDREAS

I daresay, Catharina, you have properly christened the opening of Leipzig's first coffeehouse. Your voice is the envy of the angels.

CATHARINA

Thank you, Andreas. But the praise belongs to my father and his latest cantata. Nothing spurs one’s creativity like coffee, don’t you agree, Father?

BACH

It’s the closest thing I know to divine inspiration. Or perhaps it’s the devil’s?

They all LAUGH.

CATHARINA

Now may I bring all of us cups of this most enchanting brew? I’ve heard Berlin now has a dozen such establishments, and King Frederic has had one installed in the palace at Potsdam. Poor Leipzig is always last to adopt what is new.

BACH

New isn't always better. Although I will make an exception for coffee. I will have a double serving, my dearest.

Catharina exits Stage Left.

ANDREAS

She has turned into a lovely young woman, Sebastian. You can be proud.

BACH

Indeed, and she is about to announce her engagement to a most suitable young man. Johann Altnickol. An organist of some skill who has worked as my copyist. He adores her, as he should.

ANDREAS

And what does he think of his future father-in-law?

BACH

I dare say he treats me with more respect than my own sons.

Catharina returns with a tray holding three cups and a bowl of sugar cubes. With her is Carl.

Catharina.

Look who I found hiding in the crowd.

BACH

Carl, I thought you were in class today?

CARL

I am, but my composition professor wanted to hear your coffee cantata. I told him I would accompany him.

BACH

Why don’t you have him join us?

CARL

I’m afraid he can’t, Father. He’s here with the other professors. But he sends his best wishes and admiration for your latest piece.

BACH

Really? A composition professor?

CARL

Quite remarkable, he said, for a church organist.

Silence at the table.

CATHARINA

Tell your professor, dear Carl, that your church organist father has composed for princes and kings. Any of whom would have gladly come over to greet him in person.

Carl bows.

CARL

I will. I apologize for his rudeness but I must return.

BACH

Carl, tell him I said thank you and that I would like someday to discuss composition with him.

CARL

Indeed, Father. As you say.

Carl bows again and retreats.

CATHARINA

What arrogance! You'd think the man was a prince rather than a professor.

Catharina sets down the tray of cups and glares at the professors at the other table.

BACH

Never mind, dear. I've suffered worse slights at the hands of academicians. Come sit, Catharina, and don't look so peevish.

ANDREAS

They can't see genius when it stands before them.

BACH

But I am sitting, Andreas.

They all LAUGH.

BACH CONT’D.

As they say, greatness is in the eye of the beholder. And there is but one beholder who matters.

(glancing at the other table)

And, I dare say, he doesn't wear university robes.

They LAUGH again, then Bach raises his cup in a toast.

BACH (CONT’D)

To my lovely, talented daughter, and her future happiness.

The trio clinks cups and sips.

LIGHTSFADE*.*

Action returns to Stage Right.

BACH

Why, dear Lord, can I not find it in my soul to forgive? Why do I harbor such slights against my son? The surfeit of poison in my heart has blinded me. How do I find my way back to thee in such darkness?

Bach closes his eyes as he plays the cascade of notes from the [SIXTH EPISODE OF THE FUGUE](https://youtu.be/FpZfvlWJbjg?t=587) (ending at 10:22), a respite before the final storm of the Passacaglia that will follow.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action moves to Center Stage, Study.

SCENE 12

Bach, looking curious and concerned, steps into Andreas's office. Georg stands and asks Bach (55) to have a seat.

ANDREAS

I don't know how to put this delicately, Sebastian, so I shall come straight to my point... I plan to leave my current position.

Bach stands up to protest but Andreas waves him back down.

BACH

But Andreas!

ANDREAS (CONT’D)

Please. Hear me out, Sebastian. I have been offered a professor's post at the new university in Gottingen and, quite frankly, it is an opportunity that, at my stage in life, I cannot pass.

BACH

But things are going so well here, Andreas. A new dormitory. A reputable curriculum. Certainly, you cannot jeopardize that progress by leaving now.

ANDREAS

I am leaving you in good hands, Sebastian. A fine young man, with a rigorous intellect. He is a leading scholar at the university and has ambitious plans for St. Thomas.

BACH

But does he love music, as you do?

Andreas sits down at his desk, folds his hand, then sighs.

ANDREAS

The times have changed, Sebastian. And we must change with them.

BACH

Must WE, dear friend?

ANDREAS

(firmly)

If we are to survive - yes.

BACH

Andreas, I see again the frightened boy on the road to Luneburg. After all these years, and so much success, you still have not learned to trust in God. We need you here. Not just me. The students, the congregation...

ANDREAS

I am sorry, my dear friend. But I have made up my mind. A new era of reason, not just faith, is upon us. It is time for me to return to university and learn the new ways.

Bach gets up slowly, walks to the door, pauses and turns. Andreas stands, resolute.

BACH

Music is what took us to Lueneburg those many years ago. It is the music that brought us together again. Go in peace, Andreas. And, remember, part of my soul shall go with you.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action remains on Center Stage, Office.

SCENE 13

Professor ERNESTI, the new young rector, has replaced Andreas at the desk. He is busy signing documents as Bach walks into the room.

BACH

You asked for me, Herr Rector?

ERNESTI

Ah, yes, Herr Bach, the capellmeister. Have a seat. I wanted a private word with you. I understand that you’re not happy with the new curriculum I’ve introduced here.

BACH

No, sir, I am not. Not when you eliminate all musical instruction for the students.

ERNESTI

Yes, but they may still join the choir, where you can continue to instruct them as you wish.

BACH

Boys don’t always see the necessity of music. I’ve lost almost half the students I used to teach.

ERNESTI

Herr Bach, we are here to educate children for our times, not for the past. They need to learn German, English, French, not the languages of the dead. Nor do our students have time for music. They need far more instruction in math and the sciences, more time in laboratories, to explore God's great creation. They must come to know His world through observation, precision, quantification.

BACH

With all due respect, Herr Rector, it sounds to me as though you are trying to pin the Supreme Being to one of your laboratory tables and dissect him like a frog.

(Ernesti LAUGHS.)

Tell me, how can you explore a mystery that is deepest within you, yet reaches to the farthest stars?

ERNESTI

(condescendingly)

And you would not teach these modern courses, then, because all the world should be left a mystery unto God.

BACH

No, Professor Ernesti. Examine the physical world as much as you desire. I only argue that, to know God, one must explore many paths, not the intellect alone.

ERNESTI

I will contemplate that, Herr Bach, the next time I listen to our young choristers in chapel. Now, if you may excuse me...

Ernesti smiles. Bach, fuming, rises to go.

BACH

Perhaps you should listen to what is in your heart. If it is not too frozen!

LIGHTS FADE.

Action moves to Stage Right, where Bach sits at the organ console.

BACH

Once I put my faith entirely in science -- in the great Dr. Chevalier Taylor -- when I should have placed my faith in you, Oh Lord. And for that, I have no one to blame but myself.

LIGHTS FADE.

Bach begins playing the rising suspenseful notes of the [CODA, OR CONCLUSION OF THE PASSACAGLIA](https://youtu.be/FpZfvlWJbjg?t=650), (Ending with flutter at 12:14) as the action moves to Center Stage, Bedroom, and the music fades.

SCENE 14

Bach lies in bed while Anna lovingly strokes his forehead. She is sitting beside him and staring down with a look of grave concern.

Bach is strapped inside what looks like a canvas straitjacket, his head braced in a kind of open wooden box so he can't turn his face.

DR. TAYLOR, dressed entirely in black and sporting a wig of long white curly locks, hovers over Bach like the Angel of Death. He moves a single lighted candle back and forth while studying Bach’s eyes through a magnifying glass.

ANNA

Our prayers are with you, dear Sebastian. Mine and so many others.

BACH

The prayers might better be said for the good doctor and a steady hand.

DR. TAYLOR

You needn’t fear, Herr Bach. I’ve performed this procedure dozens of times. All with excellent results.

Dr. Taylor puts down the magnifying glass and candle and, from his open black bag, retrieves a small metal retractor, which he applies to Bach’s quivering left eyelid to hold it open. Then he selects a large gold needle with a curved tip. He briefly inspects the tip, then places it in the flame of the candle until the gold burns white hot.

DR. TAYLOR

When I performed my technique on King George, his eyesight was restored instantly. 'A moment's pain,' he told me afterward, 'a lifetime of gain.'

Anna takes Bach’s hand and he grips it fiercely to his chest as Dr. Taylor bends over his face and brings his white-hot needle closer, then stabs it into his eye with a forceful jerk of hand....

LIGHTS FADE.

As Bach's ANGUISHED CRY echoes through the theater.

Action moves to Stage Left.

SCENE 15

Carl as an adult, dressed in gentleman’s finery, alights from the coach facade, pays the coachman, steps to the door and KNOCKS.

Anna opens the door, stunned to see Bach’s prodigal son. She is speechless.

CARL

Yes, I have come.

Anna embraces him.

ANNA

He will be so pleased to see you, Carl.

CARL

Truly?

Anna is near tears.

ANNA

He spends his days now sitting alone in the dark.

LIGHTS FADE.

Action moves to Center Stage, Study.

SCENE 16

Under a single spotlight, Bach is sitting motionless in his chair, staring at the drawn curtains, when a knock comes softly at the door.

He continues to sit motionless as the door opens and, from the background of daylight, Carl enters the room.

BACH

(still staring at the curtains)

Of whose company do I have the pleasure?

CARL

Carl, Father.

BACH

(pause, but no turning)

So, you have come to watch me die?

CARL

The doctor says you are mostly well, Father. Other than your sight.

BACH

Can the doctor see into my soul?

CARL

No. And that is truly where your sickness lies.

BACH

How would you know? A man of reason and intellect.

CARL

I know you are no longer composing. That is proof enough for me.

BACH

Why should you care? So, you can scoff at the ancientness of my work?

CARL

I do not scoff, Father. I’m here to ask your forgiveness. I have been a fool, consumed with childish pride. And now that you are struggling with despair, I realize how much I owe you.

Bach waves him away with his hand.

BACH

(on the verge of teas)

I’m afraid it is too late, Carl. For both of us. There is no more forgiveness in me.

CARL

Then don’t forgive me. Only allow me to help you compose again.

BACH

For whom?

CARL

For yourself. (beat) For God.

BACH

Strange talk, indeed, for a man of The Enlightenment.

CARL

I want you to compose because I want you to live, Father.

BACH

Living is not enough. Not when I have lost my faith.

CARL

Might you not find it again in your music?

BACH

Leave me, Carl. And return to Berlin where you belong. You waste your precious time here.

CARL

Only if you insist, Father. But I shall return the moment you desire to start composing again.

BACH

What your King now calls my “ditties?”

CARL

The King is consumed by his own vanity. And so was I until (pause)... until Anna asked me to come.

BACH

Then you have come for Anna, not for me. Please then. Go.

CARL

(pause)

As you wish, Father. But my offer remains. A world without your music is a darker place. I truly believe that.

He leaves and closes the door, leaving Bach sitting alone again in the dark.

LIGHTS FADE.

Carl enters Stage Left as Bach continues the [PASSACAGLIA’S CODA](https://youtu.be/FpZfvlWJbjg?t=735) (beginning at 12:15) until it reaches its FINAL ELONGATED NOTE OF TRANQUILITY. He sits at the organ console trembling and SOBBING.

Carl climbs to the loft.

CARL

Father, we’ve been looking everywhere for you. Anna is frantic. It’s the middle of the night. Are you all right?

BACH

(just above a whisper)

My son, can you forgive an old fool?

Bach tries to stand but he’s trembling and unsteady. Carl rushes to his side

CARL

Father!

Bach looks to the cross above him and pitches forward to the keyboard, EMITTING A THUNDEROUS CHORD OF NOTES.

Carl gathers him in his arms.

CARL

Boy! Come quickly! I need your help!

LIGHTS FADE.

Action moves back to Center Stage, Study, as the cantata ["BEFORE THY THRONE I NOW APPEAR"](https://youtu.be/i3FqHeY7Egg) begins to play.

SCENE 17

The cantata is still playing as Bach, 65 and near death, lies on a sofa, his eyes obscured in darkness, his crabbed right hand curled in his lap.

Seated at a desk beside him is Carl, scribbling to keep up as Bach rattles off the final notes to "BEFORE THY THRONE I NOW APPEAR," his final composition.

We don’t hear what Bach is saying to Carl, but we HEAR THE VOICES SINGING in Bach's head as they finish on a note of perfect equanimity. A moment of silence follows as Bach closes his eyes to rest.

CARL

I much like it, Father. It has a feeling of utter humility and contentment. A purity of soul.

BACH

From you, son, that is high praise. I wonder what God must think of it, if indeed He is listening.

CARL

Have you thought of a title?

BACH

Yes. “Before Thy Throne I Stand.”

CARL

(pause)

Then you have made your peace.

BACH

Only with you, dear Carl, and those I love. For an old man near death, perhaps that is enough.

Bach closes his eyes, draws a deep breath.

CARL

Would you like to rest now?

BACH

Yes. A little. But could you send Anna to me?

CARL

Indeed. She will be pleased to know you finished your cantata.

Carl stands and heads for the door.

BACH

Carl?

CARL

Yes?

BACH

You were always the most talented of my sons. Perhaps I was jealous.

CARL

If my music is so different from your own, Father, it is because I knew I could never soar to your heights.

BACH

(smiling)

Then we can both be forgiven.

Carl exits, leaving the door open.

Outside the open latticed window, the spring evening is suddenly filled with a golden light. A NIGHTINGALE BEGINS SINGING SOFTLY. Bach turns his unseeing eyes there, where we see the projection of a bird singing on a tree branch.

BACH

Nightingale, you sing because you must. God hath made music a part of your very soul, as he did mine. So sing, Nightingale. Sing while you still have God’s breath within you.

As the Nightingale CONTINUES TO SING, Bach suddenly grips his forehead in pain, his tensed left hand trembling there. He takes a deep breath, then GASPS.

BACH

(in agony)

It is time.

His breathing is more rapid now, panicky. He begins to thrash.

The nightingale flies away.

BACH (CONT’D)

(frightened)

God help me... come fill my empty soul. I must find you there. Oh, please! I implore you! Do not forsake me!

Bach's face contorts again in pain. He grips his forehead as though struck there by lightning.

He stares out the latticed window, where the sun has begun to set, the golden rays turning pink.

He smiles, at peace with himself, and reaches out for the dying light with his left hand, trembling.

We hear nothing but silence, but in Bach's eyes there is the perception of exquisite beauty.

BACH (CONT’D)

Dearest God - what music is this I hear? What perfection! What unspeakable beauty! Let me live yet to play it! For Thee alone!

His arm drops limp to the floor. His head lolls to one side, mouth agape. His unblinking eyes stare toward the window, where the setting sun blazes with a final burst of red before fading into darkness...

LIGHTS OUT.

... as the [OPENING CHORDS OF THE PASSACAGLIA](https://youtu.be/FpZfvlWJbjg), seeking, yearning, hoping, BEGIN ANEW.

THE END