

Music Notes for March 20th

Prelude: J.S. Bach: *O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde groß* BWV 622

Anthem: *Were You There?* Spiritual arr. Bob Chilcott

J.S. Bach's was born on March 21st, 1685, and it seems only appropriate to honor his birthday with the playing of one of his chorale preludes. This selection is from the *Orgelbüchlein* (literally "Little Organ Book") which is a collection of pieces originally intended to be a church organist's basic liturgical year. Bach intended 164 chorales but only completed 46; it remains his largest single collection of organ music based on chorale melodies. The chorale tune *O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde groß* (O Man, bemoan your great sin) is first found in a collection from Straßburg dated 1526. It is used several times by J.S. Bach in his choral works, the most significant being its use to close the first half of the *St. Matthew Passion*. It is slow, solemn, but surprisingly to our modern ears, written in a major key.

The anthem is an arrangement published by Oxford in 1998 of a favorite Holy Week spiritual, *Were You There?* The arranger, Bob Chilcott, is a British choral conductor and singer (he sang with the choir of King's College of Cambridge as well as The King's Singers), and oddly enough has become best known for his arrangements of American spirituals. This version of *Were You There?* is in two verses, starting with just the women singing the melody and a simple harmony line. The men then join in forming a steady harmony while the women continue with the second verse in canon, singing exactly the same music one bar apart from each other. The effect at the end is like a slow procession away into the distance.

Thomas Dawkins, organist/choir director