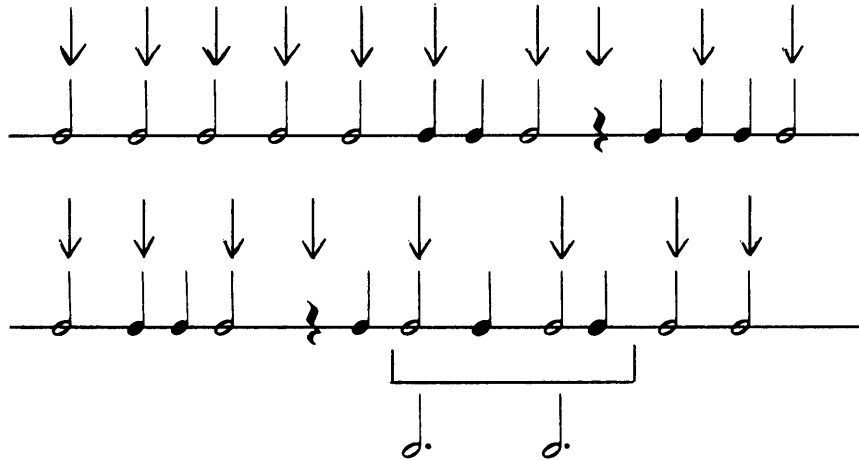


O MORNING STAR HOW FAIR AND BRIGHT
(Wie schon leuchtet)

Nearly a hundred years before Johann Sebastian Bach tried his hand at composing music, Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608) wrote the tune and words of "O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright." He included the hymn in a book he published in 1599.

For his new hymn, Nicolai re-worked a tune used earlier for singing Psalm 100. Its rhythmic pattern marches happily along to a basic half-note pulse with a dotted half-note tossed in now and then:




Bach's version of Nicolai's tune is used in this hymn study. If you look carefully, you will see that he has removed the jolly, bumpy feeling of Nicolai's rhythm. But notice the marching bass line Bach put under the melody in this line:



His constant use of 8th notes in the parts accompanying the melody adds a different kind of excitement to the hymn.

What Bach did with Nicolai's melody is called a "harmonization." That's fitting, since choirs and congregations like to sing his chorales in parts or "harmony." Nicolai's version is more fun to sing in unison, with everyone on the melody.

Nicolai based his text on Psalm 45, a kind of love song addressed to the king. He wrote "O Morning Star" as the church's love song to Christ. Perhaps that is why it became a favorite hymn for weddings. The idea of the shining star probably led to its connection with Epiphany. The text originally had seven stanzas. Notice how well the words fit Bach's music, especially in the line printed above.

Now, here's a question for you: What do you do at the places marked  in Bach's music? Turn this page upside down to find the answer.

If you said that the "fermata" means to "hold that note," you goofed! In Bach's chorales, the fermata simply shows the end of a phrase or where to take a breath.

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