

O SACRED HEAD, NOW WOUNDED
(O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden or Herzlich tut mich verlangen,
or Passion Chorale)

Perhaps the greatest poetry ever written by Christians is poetry about the suffering and death of Jesus. Whoever it was that wrote the Latin poem which became the hymn, "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded," in English was deeply grateful to Christ:

What language shall I borrow
To thank thee, dearest friend,
For this thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?

For him, being a disciple of Christ was for a lifetime and beyond:

O make me thine forever;
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
Outlive my love to thee.

Hymns like this make us realize that being a Christian is serious business. Jesus' death for our sake demands a response of faith and a commitment to service.

We need strong tunes to express such deep feelings and ideas. Probably there has never been a more effective marriage of words and music than "O Sacred Head" with the Passion Chorale. What makes this hymn so great?

First, the simple beauty of Hans Hassier's melody lends itself to legato singing. The melody moves mostly step by step, with only a few big skips, reaching its highest note in the last line.

Second, Bach's harmonization expresses the tension in the text between pain at Christ's suffering and joy in his love. After a rich, but sorrowful, beginning in A minor, the third line ends on an A major chord that begs to go somewhere. That "somewhere" is the C major key of the last line. What a wonderful brightness that line gives to these words from each stanza:

Which once was bright as morn!
Vouchsafe (give) to me thy grace.
Outlive my love to thee.

The same feeling of tension is produced by the 8th notes that pass between the main pulses in the accompaniment, but moreso by the "suspensions." Suspensions are notes held over into the next chord. See how many you can find in the Passion Chorale. This was one way Bach decorated or "ornamented" his music. If you like suspensions, you'll love Bach!

