

Organ Music during Advent- Wachet Auf ruft uns die Stimme

In Advent, some our organ music will feature settings by composers who were inspired by the great seasonal hymn Wachet Auf ruft uns die Stimme (literally- *Wake Up! A voice is calling to us!*), number 39 in our hymnbook. We will play preludes by J S Bach (1685-1750), Johann Walther (1684-1748), Heinrich Schmidt (1861-1923) and Max Reger (1873-1916).

The words and melody of this hymn were written in 1598 by Lutheran Pastor Philipp Nicolai following the outbreak of plague in Unna and is widely known and loved among German speaking people, not least because Bach re-harmonised it and then elaborated on it in both an organ prelude and cantata (BWV140). Interestingly, both in the Lutheran Church of Bach's time and in the *Evangelisches* Church today, it would be sung not in Advent itself, but on the Sunday before Advent. The readings are concerned with themes of eternal life, joyfully anticipating the coming of Christ and the expectation of Judgement Day.

The hymn references the appointed Gospel from Matthew 25, the parable of the 10 Maidens, half of whom were awake and ready with their lamps burning brightly to meet the arrival of the bridegroom (Christ himself) while the others were asleep and not prepared with any oil. After being delayed buying some, they return late to find the bridegroom had already arrived and they were locked out of the feast and sent away.

Bach's cantata *Wachet Auf* (BWV 140), lasting about 30 minutes, sets the verses of the hymn in different ways, interspersed with solos and duets with other texts. As Cantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, Bach had to compose a cantata on the relevant Gospel to be played before the sermon at every morning service, writing well over 200. Perhaps this season might be enriched by listening to one of the many wonderful performances of *Wachet Auf* on You Tube.