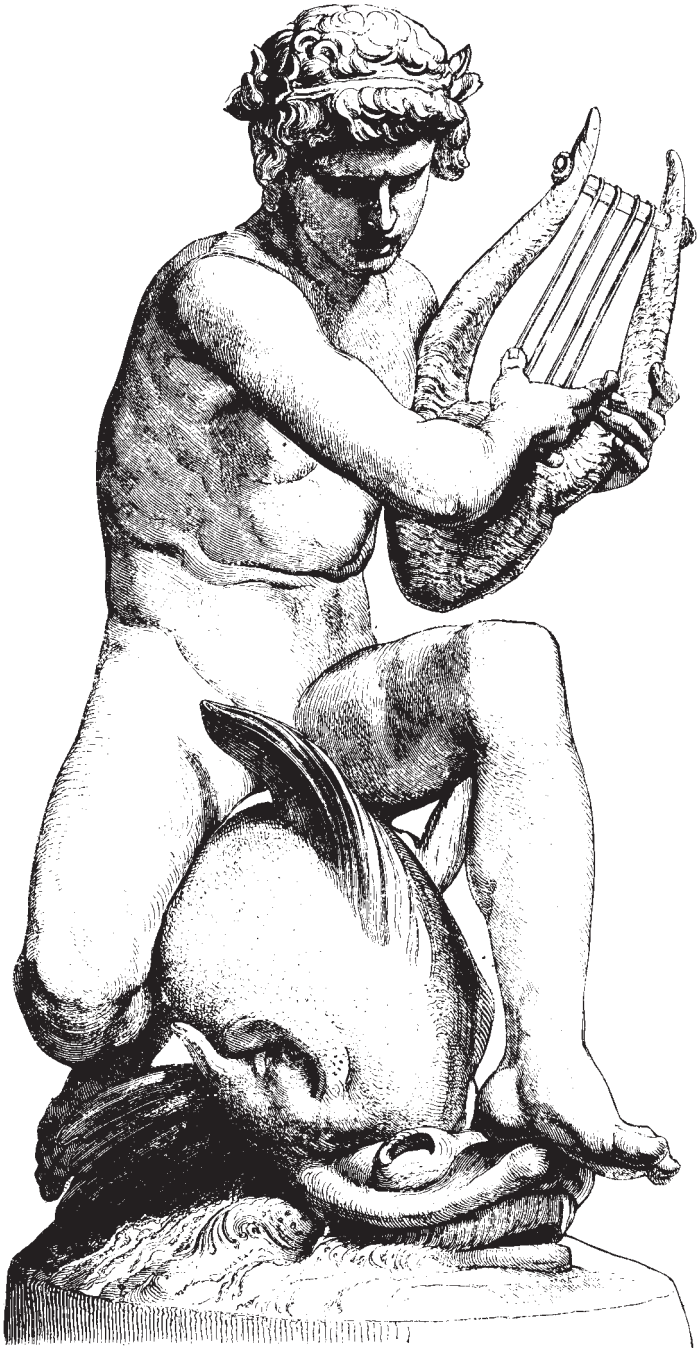
Johann Sebastian Bach



Chorale Prelude BWV 638

Es ist das Heil uns kommen her

[Salvation has come to us]

from the ***Orgel Büchlein*** BWV 599-644

transcribed for 4-part String Ensemble

edited by Alan Bonds

ABOUT THIS WORK

From Wikipedia:
The Orgelbüchlein (Little Organ Book) BWV 599–644 is a set of 46 chorale preludes for organ — one of them is given in two versions — by Johann Sebastian Bach. All but three were written between 1708 and 1717 when Bach served as organist to the ducal court in Weimar; the remainder and a short two-bar fragment came no earlier than 1726, after the composer's appointment as cantor at the Thomasschule in Leipzig.

Bach's apparent plan was for a collection of 164 settings of chorale tunes sung during the Church year so that each part of the year was represented. However, only 46 of these were completed. The manuscript, which is now in the Staatsbibliothek, leaves a number of tunes as missing or "ghost" pieces. These have been added in the 21st century;this project took nine hours in the first complete performance, giving an idea of the potential scope of Bach's "little" book. The Orgelbüchlein as Bach left it contains about 80 minutes of music which span the liturgical calendar.

Each setting takes a Lutheran chorale, adds a motivic accompaniment, and quite freely explores form. Many of the preludes are short and use four contrapuntal voices. All have a pedal part, some requiring only a single keyboard and pedal, with an unadorned cantus firmus. Others involve two keyboards and pedal. These include several canons, four ornamental four-part preludes with elaborately decorated chorale lines, and one prelude in trio sonata form.

A further step towards perfecting this form was taken by Bach when he made the contrapuntal elements in his music a means of reflecting certain emotional aspects of the words. Pachelbel had not attempted this; he lacked the fervid feeling which would have enabled him thus to enter into his subject. And it is entering into it, and not a mere depicting of it. For, once more be it said, in every vital movement of the world external to us we behold the image of a movement within us; and every such image must react upon us to produce the corresponding emotion in that inner world of feeling.

—Philipp Spitta, 1873, writing about the Orgelbüchlein in Volume I of his biography of Bach

Here Bach has realised the ideal of the chorale prelude. The method is the most simple imaginable and at the same time the most perfect. Nowhere is the Dürer-like character of his musical style so evident as in these small chorale preludes. Simply by the precision and the characteristic quality of each line of the contrapuntal motive he expresses all that has to be said, and so makes clear the relation of the music to the text whose title it bears.

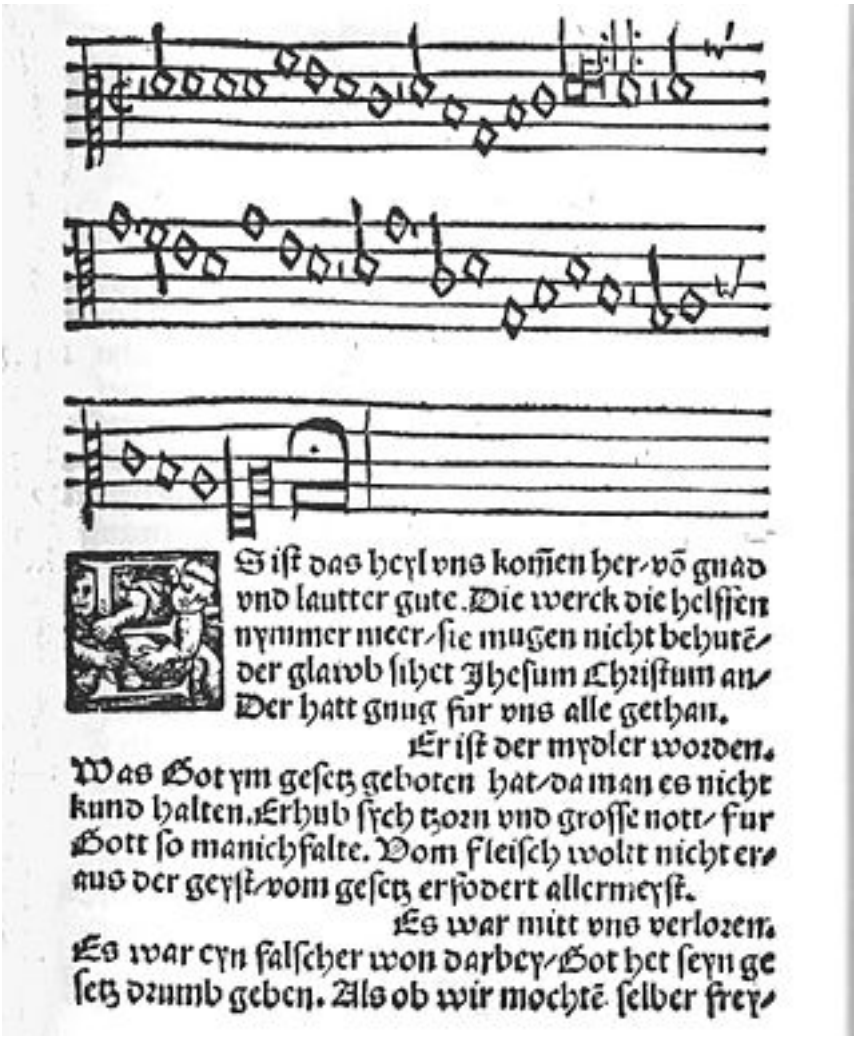
—Albert Schweitzer, Jean-Sebastien Bach, le musicien-poête, 1905

The first verse of the Lutheran hymn *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her* of Paul Speratus is given below with the English translation of John Christian Jacobi.

Es ist das Heil uns kommen her
von Gnad' und lauter Güte,
die Werke helfen nimmermehr,
sie mögen nicht behüten,
der Glaub' sieht Jesus Christus an
der hat g'nug für uns all' getan,
er ist der Mittler worden.

Our whole salvation doth depend
On God's free grace and Spirit;
Our fairest works can ne'er defend
A boast in our own merit:
Derived is all our righteousness
From Christ and His atoning race;
He is our Mediator.

The text treats a central Lutheran theme—only faith in God is required for redemption. The melody is from an Easter hymn. Many composers had written organ settings prior to Bach, including Sweelinck, Scheidt and Buxtehude (his chorale prelude BuxWV 186). After Orgelbüchlein, Bach set the entire hymn in cantata *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her*, BWV 9; and composed chorales on single verses for cantatas 86, 117, 155 and 186.



"*Es ist das Heil uns kommen her*" in the Erfurt *Enchiridion*, 1524

ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPTION

This organ work has been transcribed for Vns 1 & 2, Vla, Vc(s) & Cb. It could be performed in a variety of combinations (incl. string quartet)

Doubling the treble voice 8va illuminates the actual vhorale melody.

The fermatas are the punctuation in the original Chorale, but are meaningless in the context of this Prelude.

The transposition to E is for the benefit of the bass-line

Andante tempo ♩ = ca 60-72 seems appropriate with a light detaché in the 16th & 8th notes. There are several excellent organ performances on YouTube at approx. this tempo (and several very mushy ones).

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April 2024
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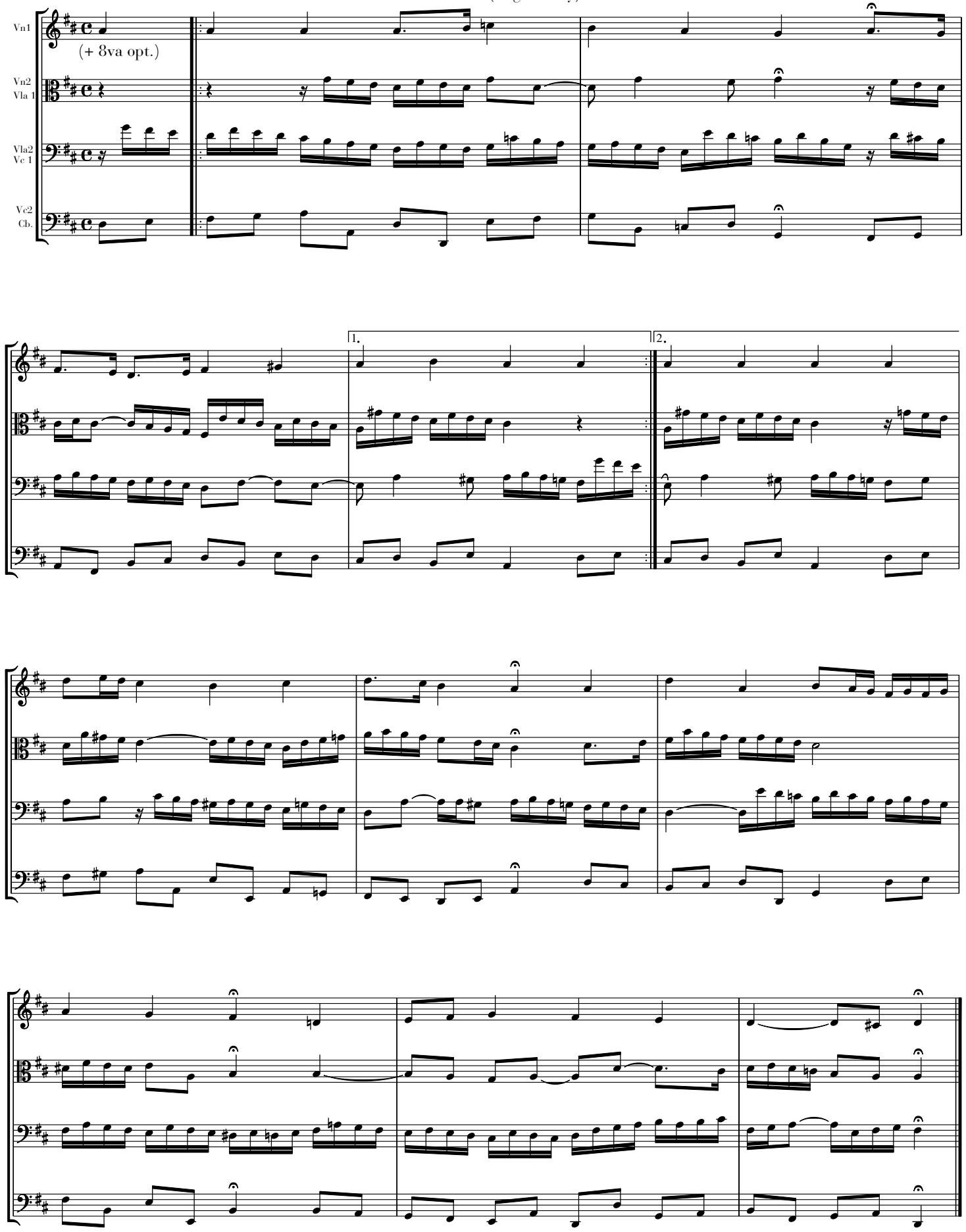
Chorale prelude on

Es ist das Heil uns kommen her

Salvation has come to us

BWV 638 in D (original key)

J.S. Bach



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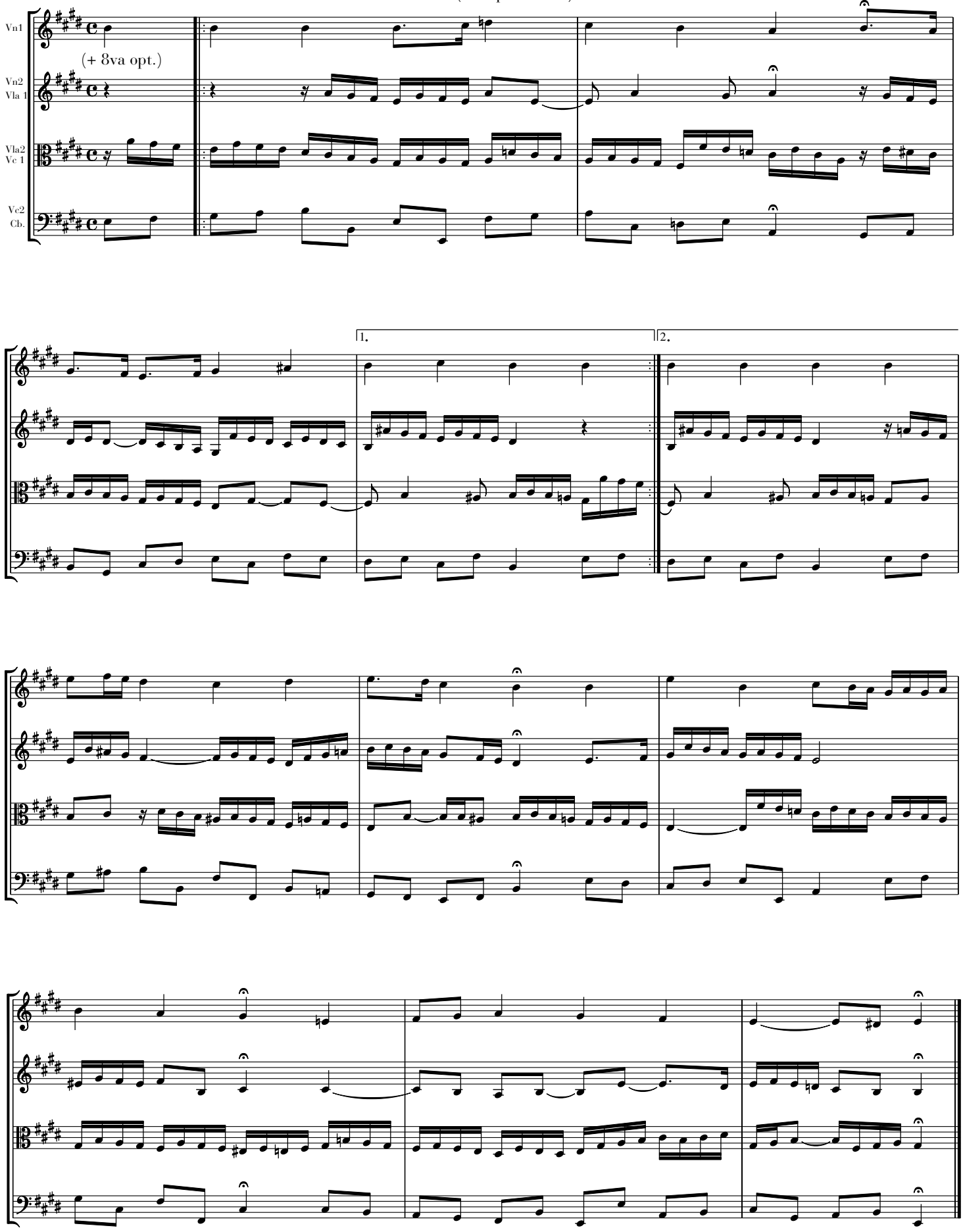
BWV 638 (transposed to E)

J.S. Bach



Violin 1)

Chorale prelude on

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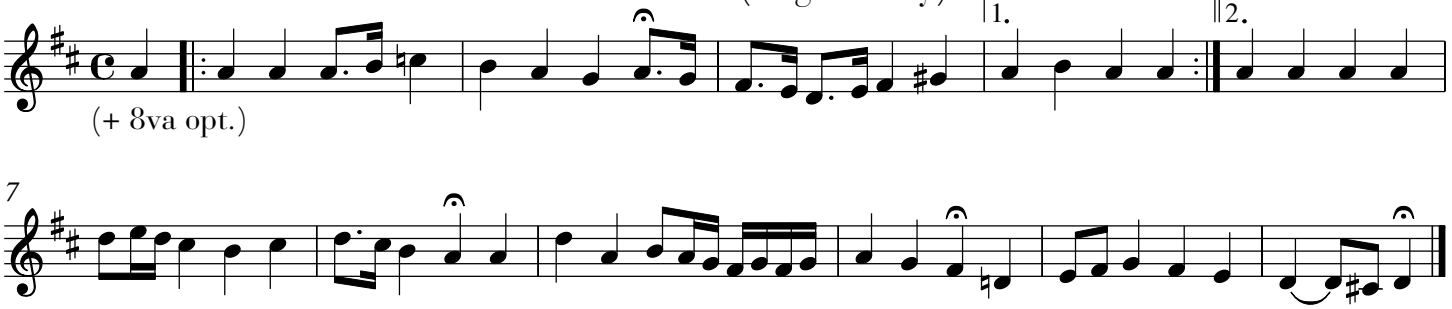

Viola 1

Chorale prelude on

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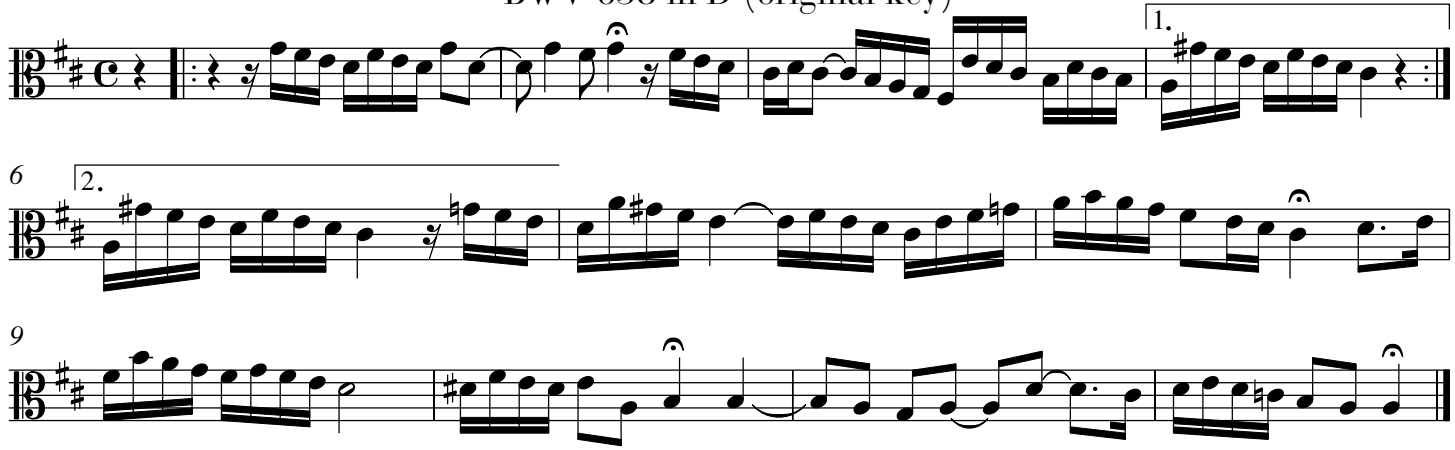

Viola 2

Chorale prelude on

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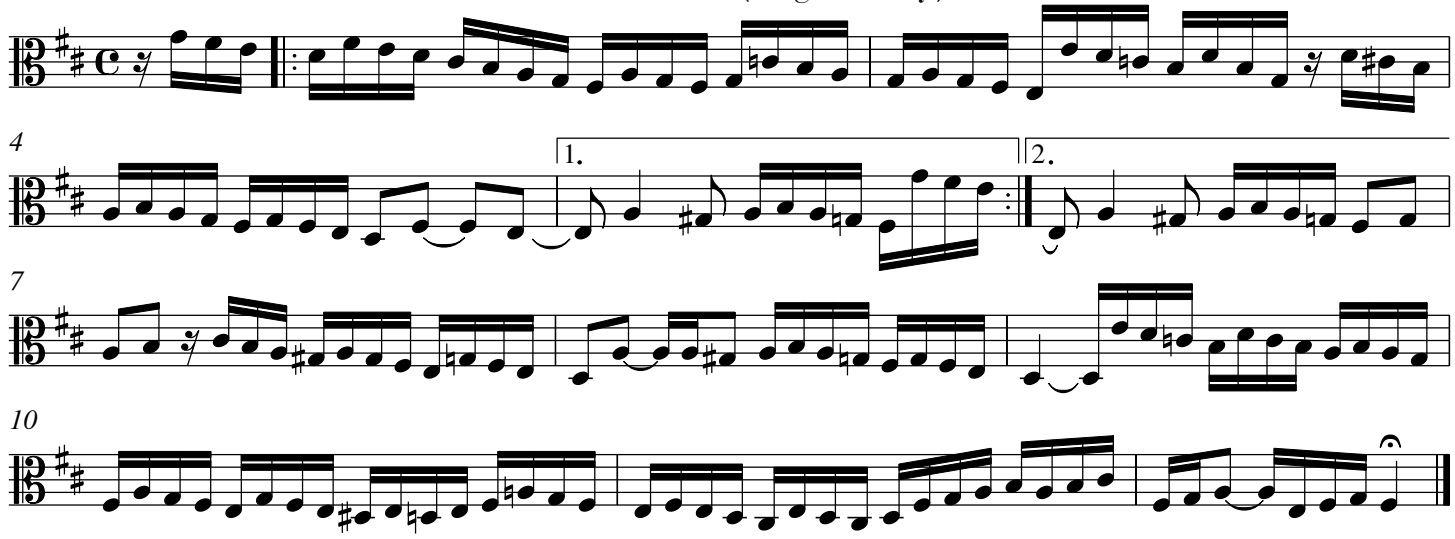

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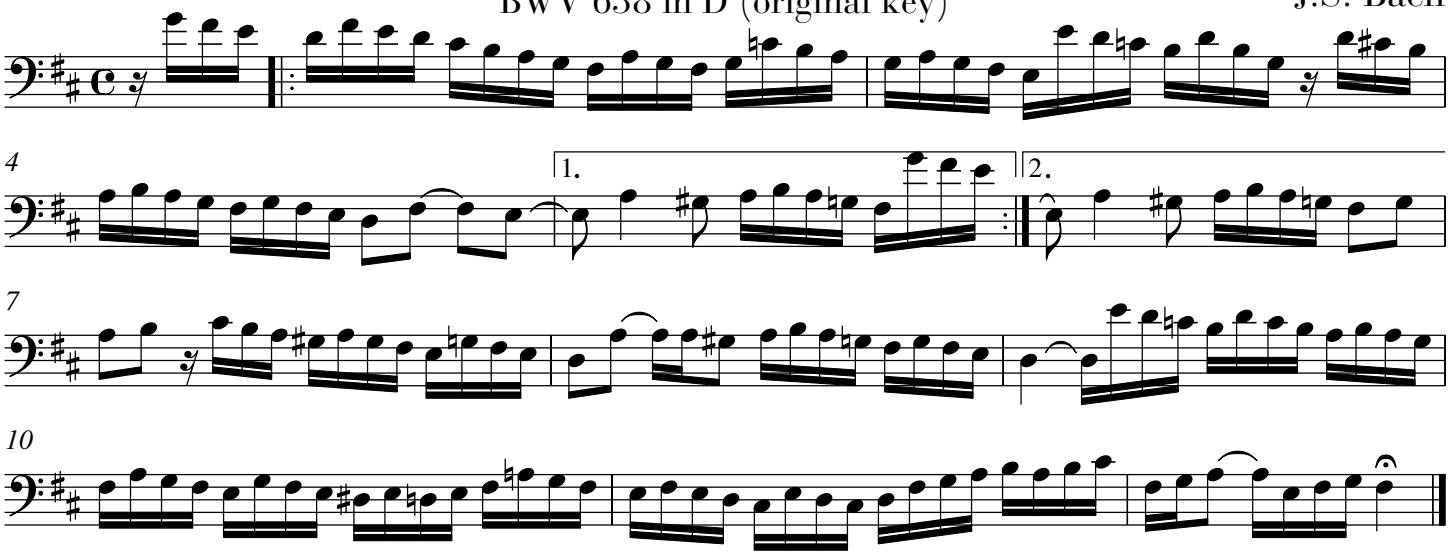

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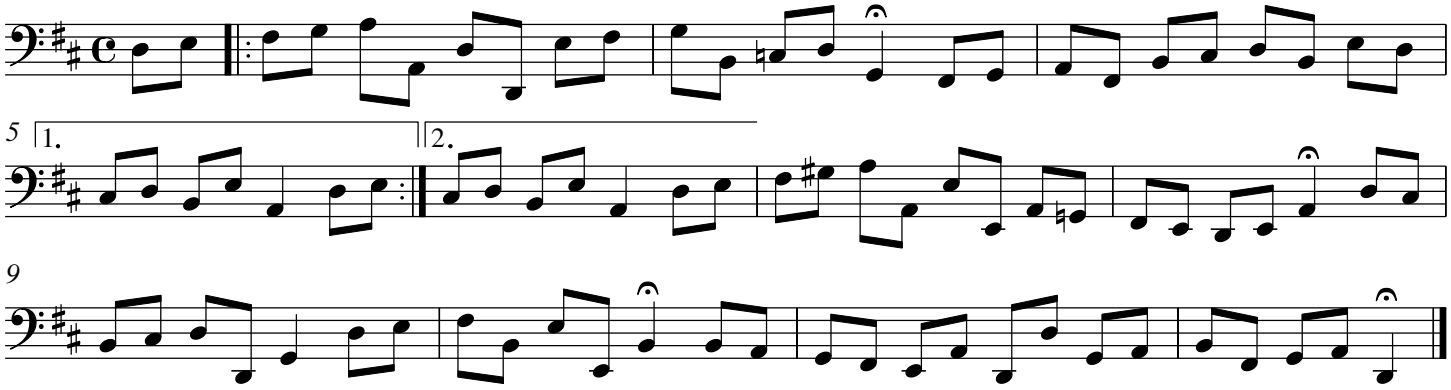

Violin 1)

Chorale prelude on

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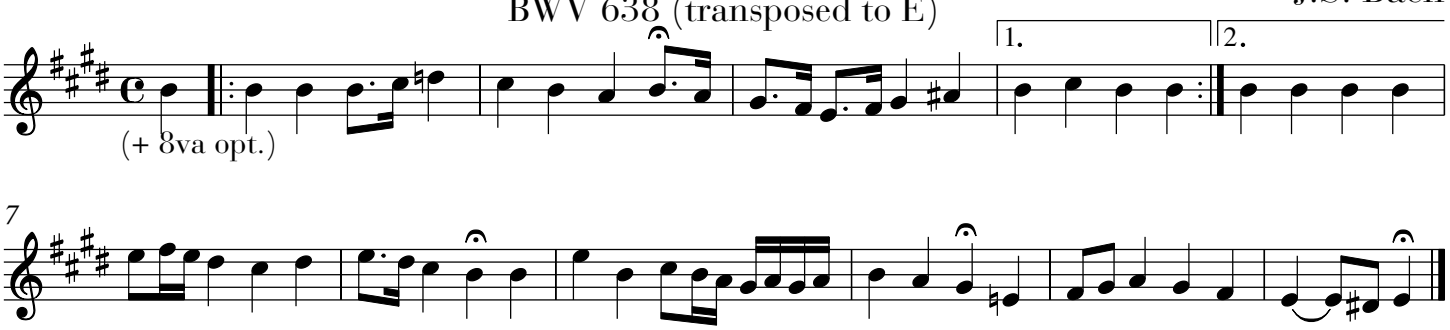
BWV 638 (transposed to E)

J.S. Bach



Violin 2)

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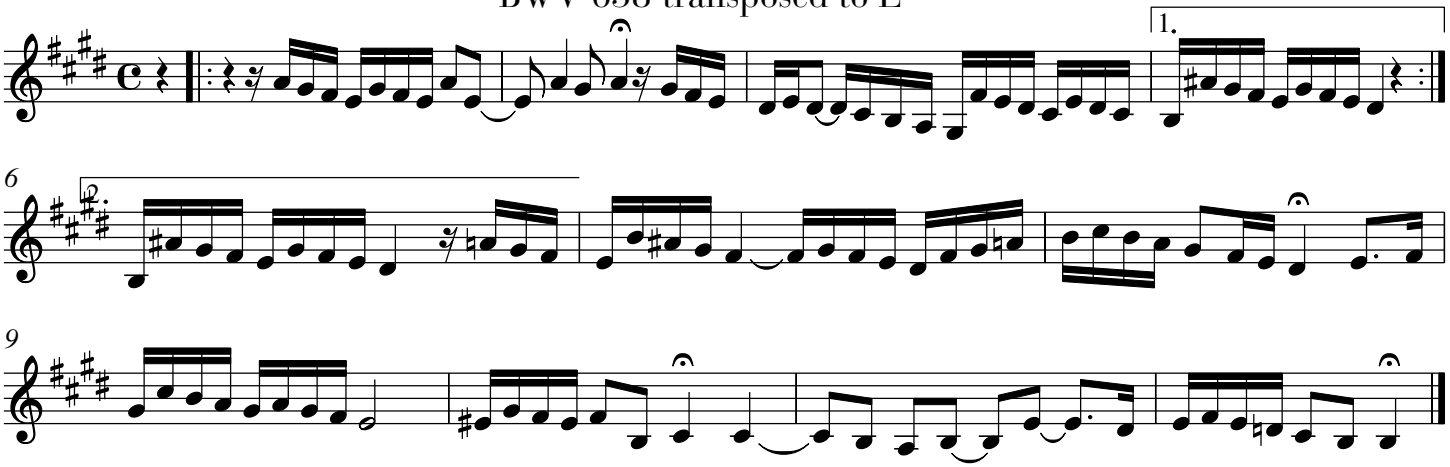

Viola

Chorale prelude on

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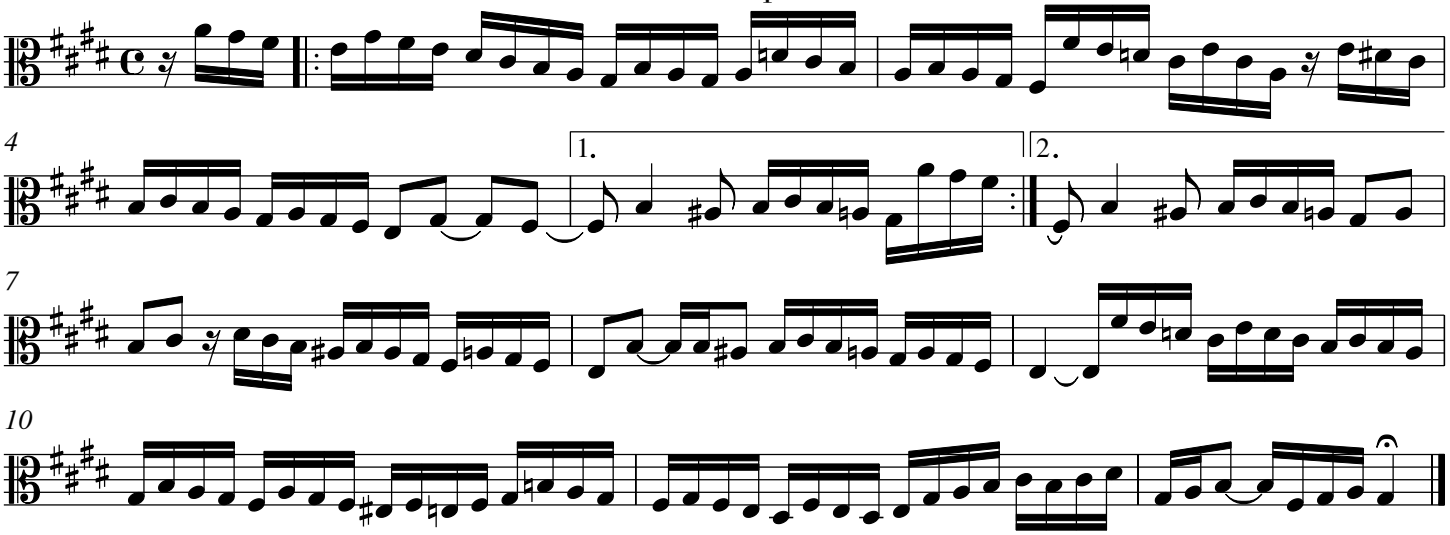

Cello 2/ Contrabass

Chorale prelude on

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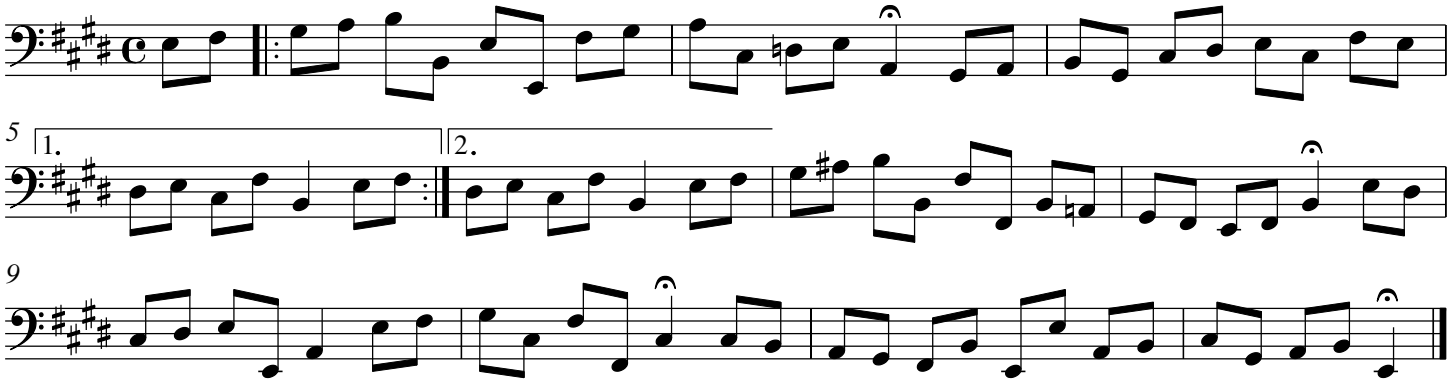
J.S. Bach