Even in an era that had recently emerged from the bloodbath that was the Thirty Years' War, Bach's personal experience of death was above average. Two brothers and a sister expired during his infancy, he'd lost both parents by the age of ten, a son and his first wife Maria Barbara had died by the time he was 35, and before his own passing he would lose a staggering seven of his children by his second wife Anna Magdalena. Little wonder, then, that when death is the subject of his music, the response is deep and personal.
As John Eliot Gardiner puts it in his magisterial *Bach, Music in the Castle of Heaven*: "While his library contained copious examples of theologians relishing the opportunities to portray the approach of death and bodily defilement in harrowing terms, Bach's cantatas that deal with the subject offer deep reservoirs of solace to those who mourn."

Eastertide is when Christianity concerns itself most intently with death and consolation, but it's also a time of Resurrection and the various proofs given by Jesus that he had risen from the tomb. Bach's "Emmaus Cantata" – "Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend warden" (Abide with us; for it is toward evening) – was written for Easter Monday in 1725 as part of his second Leipzig cycle. The day's text would have described the encounter between two disciples and the unrecognised Jesus as they journeyed towards the town of Emmaus. Arriving at dusk, Jesus seemed about to continue along the road but the two men invited him home for supper, thus providing a neat parallel between acts of Christian hospitality and the Lutheran injunction to invite Jesus into our hearts.
Bach's anonymous librettist opens with the disciples' words from Luke's Gospel and includes texts by the protestant reformers Philipp Melanchthon and Nikolaus Selnecker, before wrapping things up with the second stanza of Luther's hymn "Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort" (Maintain us, Lord, within thy word).
The opening chorus manages to convey both a sense of recent bereavement and a gentle urgency as Bach uses repetitions of the text to plead for Jesus to enter into us in body and spirit. It's likely no coincidence if the music – not unlike a stately sarabande – reminds the listener of the elegiac "Ruht wohl" chorus that concludes the *St. John Passion* (a work that Bach had revived just a few days earlier). Strings and a trio of plangent oboes support the voices whose occasional long held notes suggest the steadfastness of the Christian soul.
The alto aria that follows, "Hochgelobter Gottessohn" (Highly praised Son of God), features a perky obbligato oboe da caccia, juxtaposing an upward swinging melody in praise of Jesus with a subsequent drooping line reflecting a sense of trepidation at the impending fall of darkness. The subsequent chorale sets serene harmonies against a scurrying solo line for a violincello piccolo, a rare instrument often favoured by Bach in these late cantatas.
The second and final aria, "Jesu, laß uns auf dich sehen" (Jesus, let us look upon You), pits the mournful solo tenor against the heavy tread of strings leavened with a solo violin. It's then left to Luther's solemn chorale to end the cantata on a serious and reflective note.

By way of complete contrast, Bach opens his cantata "Am Abend desselbigen Sabbaths" (On the evening of the same Sabbath) with an extended *Sinfonia*, grand yet lightly sprung, that pits bustling strings against a clucking group of two oboes and bassoon. In fact, the whole work is a cunning recycling of a lost birthday *serenata* for Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, but you'd never know it, so fit does the composer render it for its new purpose.
First performed in 1725 on Quasimodogeniti Sunday (that's the first Sunday after Easter), it too formed part of Bach's second Leipzig cycle with a text expounding on Christ's

appearance to his disciples a week after the Resurrection. An immaculate miniature of religious storytelling, the Evangelist's role is shared between tenor and bass soloists, with reflective arias for alto and bass and a chorale duet for soprano and tenor.
To drive the drama forward, the first recitative employs ticking continuo and weird harmonic progressions to create an eerie build-up to the divine manifestation. That's then offset dramatically by an alto aria with a pair of melancholy oboes contrasting the hope of future joys with memories of happier times while reflecting on Matthew 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."
The following chorale duet with its plucky bassoon does a sterling job of lifting the spirits before the bass launches into "Jesus ist ein Schild der Seinen" (Jesus shields His own people), a fiery aria that focusses on the Saviour's hoped for protection when persecution strikes. Fortunately, a final Lutheran chorale is on hand to pacify matters with the rather pointed request that, like God in his Heaven, local authorities should offer some much-needed "good government and peace".

Surely its convoluted compositional history can be the only reason why the *Easter Oratorio* isn't better known. The original version of "Kommt, eilet und laufet" (Come, hasten and run) was written in 1725 for Leipzig's Easter Sunday service. The "Oratorio" tag came ten years later after Bach revised and expanded it, with further reworkings in the 1740s when he beefed up the third movement from a duet to a four-part chorus.
In fact, the Oratorio is based on a pastoral *dramma per musica* intended to celebrate the 43rd birthday of the Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels. In its original form, four shepherds somewhat neglectfully abandon their flocks in their haste to dash off and congratulate the royal birthday boy. The ink would scarcely have been dry before Bach was pressing the poet Picander, his collaborator on both projects, to repurpose "The Shepherd's Cantata" for the Easter service, transforming his quartet of rustic bumpkins into the more sober-minded Apostles Peter and John who now hasten to the tomb where they converse with Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary".
Uniquely for Bach, the first three movements of the *Easter Oratorio* are all in triple time. First comes a brilliantly scored Sinfonia with swinging trumpets and drums followed by an elegant Adagio where a warbling oboe chirrups above a gentle bed of strings. The dance-like opening chorus gets matters off to a joyful start with chuckling madrigalian touches on "Lachen und Scherzen" ("laughter and gladness").
Dance forms very much a part of the Oratorio's three substantial arias as well. The first, "Seele, deine Spezereien" (O Soul, your spices), is a graceful minuet for soprano with an obligato flute that coils around the vocal line like aromatic smoke ascending to heaven. It's the tenor's turn next with a rustic bourrée in which Bach incorporates a pair of rippling recorders. "Sanfte soll mein Todeskummer" (My final agony shall be gentle) conveys ideas that would be re-explored the following year in the solo cantata "Ich habe genug".
Finally, "Saget, saget mir geschwinde" (Tell me, tell me quickly) is set as a lively gavotte. To represent Mary Magdalene searching for the risen Christ, the alto soloist is paired with a sensual oboe d'amore. The rollicking final chorus, "Preis und Dank" (Laud and thanks) manages an impressive trifecta by praising the Lord and vanquishing the devil, before ushering in the Lion of Judah in a blaze of ululating trumpets.