What to Listen For

Bach: Cantata No. 140, Wachet auf (Sleepers, Awake!), No. 1. Chorale fantasia

Here's what to listen for in the first movement of Wachet auf (Sleepers, Awake!), Cantata No. 140 by J. S. Bach.

■ Four-part chorus with orchestra
In this movement, you will hear a four-part chorus with orchestra, an instrumental ensemble made up of winds, brass, strings, and organ [0:29–1:32].

■ Slow-moving chorale melody in sopranos
Bach borrowed an existing melody, a tune written by another composer, and used it as the melody of the sopranos. This tune is a chorale, a congregational hymn of the Lutheran church. You can hear it very clearly because the sopranos sing in a higher range and change pitches at a much slower rate than the other three parts of the chorus [0:29–1:32].

■ Complex, imitative polyphony in lower voices
While the sopranos sing a slow-moving melody, the lower voices sing complex, faster-moving, imitative polyphony [0:29–1:32].

■ Bar form, based on the form of the chorale melody
Bach not only borrowed the pitches of the chorale melody that someone else composed, he used its bar form as the form for this movement. Bar form is A-A-B form; the first section of music repeats and is then followed by contrasting music. The first A section sounds like this: [0:29–1:32]. The second A section sounds like this: [2:00–3:03]. Now listen to the B section: [3:24–3:55].

So remember to listen for the soprano line that moves much more slowly than the other voices that imitate one another and are accompanied by an orchestra. You will also hear three large sections of music: the first two (A) have the same music, and the third (B) introduces new music.