

Offered here for the first time in English, Pirro's 1907 work is considered a masterpiece by many. Its uniquely engaging analysis has informed and moved readers for more than a century, and it is now more available to all who seek greater insight into the expressive import of Bach's music.

The Aesthetic of Johann Sebastian Bach

by André Pirro, translated by Joe Armstrong

Order the complete book from the publisher
[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/9921.html?s=pdf>
**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

THE
AESTHETIC
— OF —
JOHANN SEBASTIAN
BACH



André Pirro

Translated by Joe Armstrong

Copyright © 2014 by Joe Armstrong

Paperback: ISBN 978-1-63263-819-9

Hardcover: ISBN 978-1-63263-849-6

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the author, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

Published by Duende Editons, Somerville, Massachusetts, 2018.

Printed by Booklocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Cover design by Todd Engel

First published in English by Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Pirro, André, 1869–1943, author.

[L'Esthétique de Jean-Sébastien Bach. English]

The Aesthetic of Johann Sebastian Bach / André Pirro; translated by Joe Armstrong.

Translation of: L'Esthétique de Jean-Sébastien Bach. Paris: Fischbacher, 1907.

French reprint: Geneva: Minkoff, 1984.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-978-1-63263-819-9 (paper)

1. Bach, Johann Sebastian, 1685–1750. 2. Music/Aesthetics/Education.

I. Armstrong, Joe, 1944 – translator. II. Title.

Library of Congress Control Number 2018944085

Printed on acid-free paper.

Second Printing

CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	vii
<i>Translator's Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	1
I. Direction of Motifs	11
II. Formation of Motifs	41
III. Rhythmic Formation of Motifs	93
IV. Simultaneous Melodies	141
V. Commentary from the Instrumental Accompaniment	163
VI. Orchestration	211
VII. Interpretation of Text	253
VIII. The Principal Compositional Forms in Bach's Vocal Music	285
IX. Compositions Joined, Successively, to Texts of Different Natures	325
X. Expression in Bach's Instrumental Music	345

XI. Bach and Early Music – Bach and Foreign Music	379
XII. Johann Sebastian Bach, German Cantor	419
General Bibliography	471
Musical Bibliography	479
Index of Names	485
Index of Bach's Works Cited	495
Writings of André Pirro	509

CHAPTER SEVEN

INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT

“Word for word” practices of the early masters. – How Bach obeys the suggestions of the words. – Procedures of his style. – Repetition of words. – Repetition of motifs. – Insistence. – Progression. – Important words. – Expressive role of the vocal lines. – Major and minor modes. – The different voices.

“Word for Word” Practices of the Early Masters

We have now finished studying Bach’s vocabulary, and we know the components of his language—how he translates words into melody, harmony, rhythm, and coloring. But even though we possess the lexicon of his poetics, we must remember that his metaphors are not all new and that most of his forms are renovations, not original creations. From an artistic standpoint, however, our work thus far has something sacrilegious about it. We have had to ruin all the synthetic power of the music, divide its coherent beauty, break up its lines and desiccate its charm. From prophetic hymns, we have had to extract an infantile word-for-word correlation. We have taken this expressive whole, in which feeling overflows, complex and alive—where all our long string of epithets has failed to capture all at once—and we have broken it up into the separate images that are usually united within it. But we are now going to attempt to re-establish, in their sequence, the waves of this eloquent current that we have disrupted. It means little to know that Bach’s work is bursting with symbols. Age-old craft is woven into it, but we would be singularly wrong to attribute Bach’s particular genius—through which he held

the greatest position of his epoch—to the typical attributes of a musician born in the 17th century. Observing that Bach uses the same allegorical formulas as his predecessors and his contemporaries is hardly enough to demonstrate that his work expresses intense and profound feeling. But we will try to learn how he uses these common recipes and how he ennobles them through appropriation. After having determined the roots of his language, we must use them to understand his rhetoric.

How Bach Obeys the Suggestions of the Words

First, we must ask how he applies the meaningful motifs, harmonies, and rhythms whose interpretive value is obvious from our examinations thus far. The resources of his verbal treasure are seemingly unlimited, and we need to know if he uses them constantly by translating each word of the text with a word from his musical dictionary and not letting a single allusion pass by without a choice or an ordering so that all the details in a composition will follow the same plan. Forkel—a friend of Bach's two eldest sons, Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emmanuel—assures us that, as a guiding principle, Bach had a devotion to the general effect of the words, and never to their individual expression.¹ But do we see in Forkel's statement a distinct description of Bach's method, or simply a reflection of Forkel's own opinion, ascribing to the master he admires the procedure he himself judges most rational? I could readily believe that Forkel, or Bach's sons, in their worship of the great musician, attributed this doctrine to him if we did not quite often find in the works of the masters contradictions of the precepts Forkel and Bach's sons professed. Besides, even if Bach had declared himself on this point and had advised his composition pupils to heed the overall substance of the text more than its isolated words, he had not established a new rule as one might wish to think. In a work published in 1696, Wolfgang Caspar Printz—otherwise known for his historical writings²—counsels composers not only to observe the generalized meaning of the text for which they wish to compose, but also to illustrate each word “so that the notes appear to restate what the words mean.” But to this general remark, which at first appears to contradict the precept attributed to Bach, Printz adds a paragraph that contains exactly the same instruction as Forkel's text: “But if a soulful emotion must be expressed, the composer will have more regard for this than for the individual words—not that he cannot take them into account, but he must not specifically express words that are opposed to the emotion he is acting upon. For it would be silly to compose only sad music to the lines ‘Cede dolor, cede mœror, lachrymaeque flentium’ (Abandon

¹ Johann Nicholas Forkel, *Über J. S. Bachs-Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig: 1802), 35.

² Wolfgang C. Printz, *Historische Beschreibung der edelen Sing-und Kling-Kunst* (Dresden: 1690).

pain, abandon grief, tears, and weeping) just because of the words ‘dolor,’ ‘mœror,’ and ‘lachrymaeque flentium’ while the text as a whole breathes with joy.”³ In part three of his *Comparison de la Musique italienne et de la Musique française* (1706), Lecerf de la Viéville has us note that, contrary to this sensible prescription, Campra sins, in his *In exitu Israël de Ægypto* (When Israel went out of Egypt), “by awkwardly responding to the Latin meaning” when he composes a duet “that cries out at length and in full voice” to the words from the psalm “non clamabunt” (they do not cry out).⁴ Johann Mattheson very often expounds similar ideas. In the second volume of his *Critica musica* he writes that music must strive to “enlighten and animate our thoughts rather than to adorn the words.”⁵ Elsewhere, he derides the composer who adapts a “heroic” melody to the text “The master of the world has not appeared to reign, but to serve.”⁶ He also deems it useful to note—in the second part of his treatise *Der volkommene Capellmeister*—that a phrase speaking of “keeping tears from the eye represents consolation, not weeping, and is not suited for a lament,” and he adds that “the words ‘I suppress joy, and have no laughter in my heart’ would sound wrong if one chose to write runs or leaping notes on ‘joy’ and ‘laughter.’”⁷ The last of these Mattheson citations is from 1739, and the first is from 1725. Bach had already been writing for a long time; so only Printz could have had an influence on him during the period when his style was still forming—an influence that we must admit was not strong enough to prevent his frequently falling into the abuse that Printz so severely condemns.

In fact, Bach often allows himself to be preoccupied with the image suggested by a single word—to the point of forgetting the overall idea. Certain words are so directly linked to precise motifs that he abandons himself without hesitation to the impulses evoked by from them and instantly reacts. Examples of a word’s immediate influence abound. For instance, in the first alto recitative from the *Christmas Oratorio*, on the words “abandon thy weeping now,” we find a very characteristic motif of lamentation accompanied by diminished seventh chords.⁸ Then, at the end of the first bass recitative of the cantata *Wachet! betet!* the melodic line is colored mournfully with accidentals, and the rhythm labors on the word “zaget” (be dismayed)—even though its meaning is transformed by a negative: “Therefore, be not dismayed.”⁹ In the recitative—so righteous in tone—

³ Wolfgang C. Printz, *Phrynidis Mytilenaei oder des satyrischen Componistens* (Dresden and Leipzig: 1696), 1:114.

⁴ Jean-Louis Lecerf de la Viéville, *Comparison de la Musique italienne, et de la Musique française* (Brussels: 1704), 135.

⁵ Mattheson, *Critica musica* (Hamburg: 1725), 295.

⁶ Johann Mattheson, *Der neue Göttingische aber viel schlechter, als die allen Lacedämonischen urtheilende Ephorus* (Hamburg: 1727), 92.

⁷ Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (Hamburg: 1739), 201.

⁸ BWV 248/3, mm. 9–10.

⁹ BWV 70/2, mm. 13–18.

that begins the cantata *Mein Gott, wie lang*, a bright vocal line is developed on the word “Freuden” (joy) when the text says that the wine of joy is lacking.¹⁰ And in a recitative from the Ascension oratorio *Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen*, Bach joins a sequence of ascending notes to the words “turned around toward Jerusalem *away from the mountain*”—a climbing formula in the spirit of his allegorical language that is tantamount here to a misinterpretation.¹¹ We meet another example of pictorial disparity in the first chorus from the cantata *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten* where the accompanying bass line depicts collapse and rapid ruin while the voices sing “He has not built on sand.”¹² Here again Bach has instinctively chosen the most striking image that appeared to him and, as it were, dominated his imagination as soon as the word to which it was bound had shone forth from the text. In fact, he only commits such errors of interpretation if the words offer him images we might call unavoidable—insofar as they are familiar to him. He does not “assume their meaning clumsily,” as Lecerf de la Viéville says when pointing out similar errors, except when presented with “words prominent in all languages, and for which composers have a common regard.”¹³ Bach’s weakness, therefore, may be attributed to by his traditional training.

Procedures of his Style

It is again through subconscious habit that Bach gives a displaced descriptive importance to certain words that are transposed into the domain of the abstract and no longer represent anything tangible. We see him do this in the cantata *Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn* where he has the bass descend to low E for translating the words: “What God has ordained, reason cannot indeed *fathom*.”¹⁴ A figure just as unnecessary also refers to the idea of depth in the alto recitative of the secular cantata *Dramma per Musica: Vereinigte Zwietracht der wechselnden Saiten* (Music drama: Discord of changing strings) (1726).¹⁵ In the cantata *Herr Gott, dich loben alle wir* the alto sings of “the lofty wisdom” on high notes¹⁶—a peculiarity, however, that could be justified here by the fact that the key words of the discourse in some way evoke a rising of the notes. But in the Passions the same adjective, “hoch” (high), applied to the high priest (“der hohe Preister”), is almost always delivered on a high note—a procedure not always explained by the declamation’s perspective and one that also seems more likely to be a holdover from its use by earlier composers.

¹⁰ BWV 155/1, mm. 13–15.

¹¹ BWV 11/7c, mm. 1–3.

¹² BWV 93/1, mm. 61–69.

¹³ Lecerf de la Viéville, *Comparaison de la Musique*, pt. 3:70.

¹⁴ BWV 152/5, mm. 10–12.

¹⁵ BWV 207/8, mm. 1–2.

¹⁶ BWV 130/2, mm. 1–12.

Mattheson condemns composers who are too faithful to these false correspondences: "But we make a grotesque imitation out of the music if we let the melodic line reflect the words low, high, earth, jest, sorrow, joy, falling, climbing, tears, and a thousand others like them without ever considering whether reason approves the melismas and particular figures we choose. I do not see why anyone would prefer an illustration of height in response to the words 'Do not aspire to lofty things.' 'Lose heaven, and gain the earth' is a proposition that should be understood figuratively, not literally, and neither a raising nor a lowering of notes is necessary The prayer 'keep me from falling into sin' need not be expressed with a descending vocal line, etc."¹⁷

But we cannot deny it—Bach sometimes appears to yield to this shortcoming. It seems that certain words live an independent, objective life in his imagination and appear in his works as *dramatis personae* who are always recognizable.¹⁸ He sees them dressed in costumes that never change, and their faces remain the same—except in the scenes where he does not want them to be detected, and they succumb, so to speak, to being divested of their physiognomies. His actors keep the masks of their parts until the end, and he allows their characters to develop without being affected by changes in the action. But it would be wrong to attribute this obstinacy about verbal motifs to a misunderstanding of the texts or to the neglect of a composer in too much of a hurry. We would fail to recognize Bach's perceptiveness and the great ingenuity with which he creates his renderings. Ultimately, these conflicting details are lost within the whole and are rectified by the rest of the composition as the context absorbs or modifies them. Quite often, far from being disturbed, the musical commentary benefits from a diversity that, on first glance, we might deem indiscriminate. This mixing of impressions does not lack in realism: it embodies the disorderliness of feelings. And the incongruous expressions do not necessarily destroy the meaning of the phrase; they are more likely to enhance it through their clashing antitheses. Moreover, in many cases, these contradictions have none of the silly coarseness of Mattheson's examples. Much to the contrary, they reveal a profound and delicate psychology. I do not question Mattheson's ruthlessness in criticizing the brilliant melismas that Bach joins to the word "Freuden" (joy) in the following passage of the first recitative from the cantata *Mein Gott, wie lang*, "The wine of joy fails" (ex. 7.1). But does not his dwelling on the word "joy" add to the bitterness of its absence—by way of its abundance? And let us look at how this melisma is accompanied: the instrumental bass never ceases murmuring evenly and heavily as if through an opaque mist, while, on the other hand, the upper strings convey the picturesqueness of the idea with a rustling of chords that pour forth in a direction contrary to the bubbling soprano motif.

¹⁷ Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, pt. 2, chap. 11.

¹⁸ In the cantata *Erfreute euch, ihr Herzen*, Bach uses the chromatic motif of sorrow in the phrase "Ye can put to flight grieving, fearing, anxious trepidation, etc." (BWV 66/1, mm. 156–198).

der Freu - - - - - den - wein gebricht
the wine - of - joy fails

Ex. 7.1. *Mein Gott, wie lang, ach lange*, BWV 155/1, mm. 13–15.

This example clearly shows us that Bach knows how to maintain the expressive unity of the phrase while safeguarding the individuality of the word that imposes itself on his imagination. In most passages where he seems to sacrifice the idea for the word, we can discern the penetrating meaning and absolve him from any reproach for incoherence. The single example that we have just seen here is enough, moreover, to prove that Bach succeeds in reconciling the most opposing principles in his work, which is at once both meticulous and broad.

Repetition of Words

Another point follows from the last one: it is that if it is impossible to judge Bach without knowing his contemporaries' opinions on and practices of composition, it would be equally dangerous to seek to judge him according to their strictures. Mattheson's just-cited observations apply directly to many 18th-century works in which the mechanism of representing images takes the place of inspiration. But when directed at Bach, the same censures very often miss the point in analogous cases that on first examination we would believe to be much the same. Bach is infinitely more inaccessible to analysis than masters of lesser genius. The intricacies of his musical technique arise entirely from the intricacies of his thinking, and we find in both of them the same detours and remote connections. We cannot make an immediate assessment by merely skimming his work, because it eludes simplistic judgments and transcends ordinary critical methods. Mattheson, whose writings are full of erudition and whose thinking is nonetheless very supple, is seriously mistaken when he tries to submit Bach to the common standard of measurement. In his *Critica musica*, he ridicules an unnamed composer who repeats the subject of a verb several times in isolation and then restates short sentence fragments: "Ich, ich, ich, ich hatte viel Bekümmernis, ich hatte viel Bekümmernis, in meinem Herzen, in meinem Herzen" ("I, I, I, I had much grief, I

had much grief, in my heart, in my heart”).¹⁹ These are the first words of a cantata whose poetry is by Saloman Franck (1659–1725), and the composer Mattheson refers to is Bach—who undoubtedly wrote the work in 1714 in the month following his nomination to the post of “concertmaster” of the Weimar court.²⁰ Obviously, without the music this repetition of words is somehow offensive, but when they are sung it is quite otherwise. Three consonant chords separated by quarter-note rests give the personal pronoun a strange power of expression. A long series of afflictions already burdens this “I,” which the voices sing first in somber accord and then allow to sound out with increasing stress up to a final chord that remains in suspense before the fugal theme begins to unfurl in slowly hammered notes. We could say that all the sadness the choir must proclaim is concentrated in these first three disheartening chords. The voices have barely stated anything yet, but pain has spoken through these profound and isolated chords, and the single word we have heard is enough to forewarn us, through fellow feeling, that this pain is personal to each one of us (ex. 7.2).

Ich, ich, ich, ich hat-te viel Be-küm-mer-niss, ich hat-te viel
I, I, I, I had much grief, I had much

Ich hat-te viel Beküm-mer-niss
I had much grief

Ich, ich, ich
I, I, I

cont. Ten.

Ex. 7.2. *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*, BWV 21/2, mm. 1–3.

In the cantata *Schau, lieber Gott*, the same word is repeated with somewhat of an emphasis: “Fear not, I—I am with you” (ex. 7.3).

¹⁹ Mattheson, *Critica musica*, 2: 368.

²⁰ Spitta, *J. S. Bach*, 1:525.



Ex. 7.3. *Schau, lieber Gott, wie meine Feind*, BWV 153/3, mm. 9–12.

Here again, Bach could have incurred Mattheson's reprimand. However, this repetition, like the preceding one, perfectly agrees with the lyrical declamation. In his *Ephorus* (1727), Mattheson himself approves of repeating words in the vocal part: "To those who cannot bear the over-frequent repetition of some of the words in arias, we gladly grant that too many repetitions tire the listener; but, if there are too few, he will not be moved. An emphatic word, an energetic feeling, cannot engrave itself more powerfully upon the soul than through a penetrating repetition. Holy scripture, which we must recognize incontestably as supreme judge in such discussions gives enough examples of this in psalms 148 and 150, and especially in 136."²¹ So, in principle, Mattheson accepts the repetition of important words; but in Bach's passages that he has criticized so directly, he has not understood—or has not wished to understand—how much dramatic intensity there is in the gasping repetition of the word "I," from which the anguish of each individual moan breaks out in the concerted wailing.

Long before Mattheson the theologian Mithobius declared, in his *Psalmodia Christiana* (1665), that "experience confirms that the frequent repetition of words—such as is the practice in motets and choruses—profoundly implants God's word in men's hearts with all the more joy and power."²² And Lecerf de la Viéville also recognized the force of repeated words without actually countenancing their use. In fact, speaking of Italian composers, he says "A fault that shows that they overdo expression—and that they intend to overdo it—is their repetitiveness. To make a word felt, they repeat it for a quarter of an hour. The secret is wonderful and spiritual."²³

In Bach's earliest works we already see important words brought to light in this way. For instance, the first chorus from the cantata *Gott ist mein König* (1708) begins with chords on which the word "Gott" (God) builds itself up, as if Bach wished to keep the listener's attention entirely on this radiant word: "God, God, God is my king, God, God, God is, God is my king."²⁴ Likewise, in the phrase "thou art the God who helps me," in the second chorus of the cantata *Nach dir, Herr, verlangst mich*, he emphasizes "the God" by suddenly uniting the four

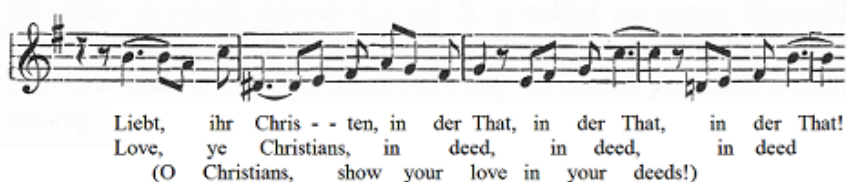
²¹ Mattheson, *Der neue Göttingische*, 103.

²² Hector Mithobius, *Psalmody Christiana* (Jena: 1665), 261.

²³ Lecerf de la Viéville, *Comparaison de la Musique*, part 3:130.

²⁴ BWV 71/1, mm. 1–7.

voice parts and repeating the words several times.²⁵ Using the same device, he stresses the words “He is not here, not here” in the tenor aria from the Easter cantata *Denn du wirst meine Seele*;²⁶ and in the Easter cantata of 1713 or 1714, *Ich weiss, dass mein Erlöser lebt*, he expresses impatient longing to leave the earth with the impassioned singing of “How soon, soon, soon, I shall be near Jesus.”²⁷ At the beginning of this same cantata, the Christian’s certainty is affirmed by repetition in the phrase “I know, I know, I know that my redeemer lives.”²⁸ So Bach frequently proclaims the idea to us that must, in his opinion, dominate the text he is rendering, and these highlightings in the musical commentary very often inform us of profound reasons for his particular interpretation and reveal with exactitude his soul’s preferences and the order of his thoughts. In this last example, the obstinate restating of the words of conviction gives them the value of a solemn act of faith. Furthermore, he uses the same means in cantata BWV 160 to emphasize Jesus’s words “It is good for you that I depart,”²⁹ and in the cantata *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes*, the alto similarly stresses the advice given to Christians to show their love “in deed(s)” (ex. 7.4).



Ex. 7.4. *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes*, BWV 76/12, mm. 16–20.

Repetition of Motifs

In these last examples, insistence is not only manifested through the repetition of words but also through the repetition of the motif. Bach already adopted this procedure in his earliest works, and its effect is remarkable in the cantatas *Aus der Tiefen* (ex. 7.5a) and *Gottes Zeit* (ex. 7.5b), in which some passages that are more recited than sung are doubled—giving their declamation a singular power of emotion and majesty. Moreover, in both cases the words are of great importance

²⁵ BWV 150/4, mm. 13–16.

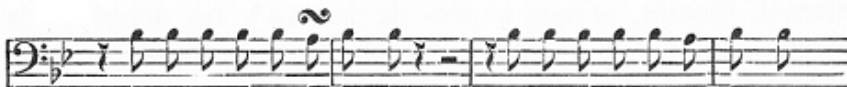
²⁶ BWV 15/4, mm. 29–35. [This cantata was composed by Johann Ludwig Bach according to Unger, *Handbook*, 51.—Trans.]

²⁷ BWV 160/5, mm. 17–19. [This cantata was composed by Georg Philipp Telemann. Unger, *Handbook*, 533.—Trans.]

²⁸ BWV 160/1, mm. 29–39 and 90–96.

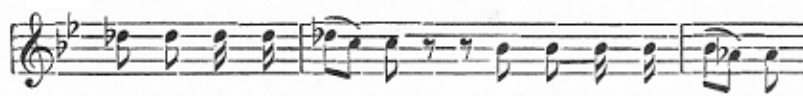
²⁹ BWV 108/1, mm. 11–14.

from the Christian's point of view, since they involve the doctrine of pardon and redemption.



denn bei dir ist die Ver-ge - bung, denn bei dir ist die Ver - ge - bung
for with thee there is forgiveness, for with thee there is forgiveness

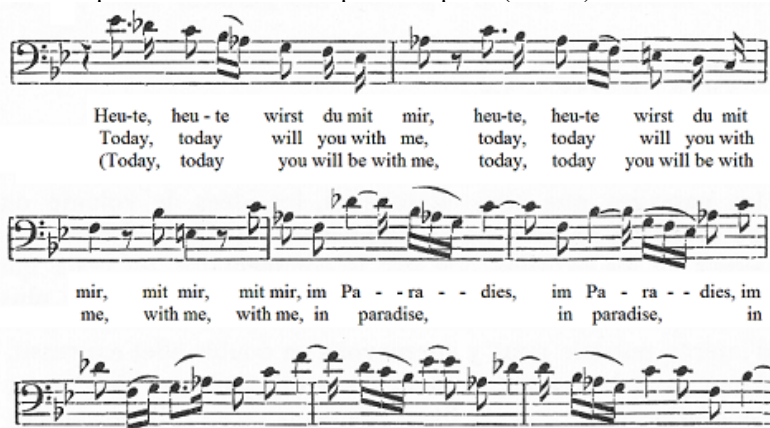
Ex. 7.5a. *Aus der Tiefen, rufe ich Herr, zu dir*, BWV 106/2, mm. 41–44.



du hast mich er - - lö - set, du hast mich er - - lö - set
thou hast me redeemed, thou hast me redeemed
(thou hast redeemed me, thou hast redeemed me)

Ex. 7.5b. *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, BWV 106/3a, mm. 10–12.

In the same cantata—*Gottes Zeit*—we have another example of recurring words and motifs, and it is important to consider here the nature of this source of musical development. In the excerpt we will examine next, repetitions of text have an obvious expressive value, while repetitions of the musical line elevate the tone of speech to the level of lyricism. We find no trace of the redundancy that pours out in insignificant repeats in so many Italian works—whether originally Italian or merely written in that idiom. Here all arises from feeling, which reaches all the way from deep tenderness to contemplative rapture (ex. 7.6).



Heu-te, heu - te wirst du mit mir, heu-te, heu-te wirst du mit
Today, today will you with me, today, today will you with
(Today, today you will be with me, today, today you will be with

mir, mit mir, mit mir, im Pa - - ra - - dies, im Pa - ra - - dies, im
me, with me, with me, in paradise, in paradise, in

Pa - ra - dies sein, im Pa - - ra - - dies, im Pa - - ra - - dies, im Pa -
paradise be, in paradise, in paradise, in pa-

ra - - dies, im Pa - ra - dies sein, heu - te, heu - te wirst du mit
radise, in paradise be, today, today will you with
today you will be with

mir, heu-te, heu-te wirst du mit mir, mit mir, im Pa - ra - dies
me, today, today will you with me, with me, in paradise
me, today, today you will be with me, with me in paradise)

sein, im Pa - ra - dies, im Pa - ra - dies, im Pa - - - -
be, in paradise, in paradise, in paradise

- - - - ra - dies sein
- - - - be

Ex. 7.6. *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, BWV 106/3a, mm. 25–39.

Insistence

At times, it is the music alone that is insistent. The words are not repeated as in the previous examples, but the verbal sequence unfolds on a melodic line where motifs of a uniform structure pass by without stopping. These obstinate patterns have a profound meaning. Their shape is generally quite simple: often they are formed, we might almost say, from only a single note, to which the voice continually returns after being carried away from it barely one or two scale steps. This peculiarity bonds these vocal formulas with the themes of will, task, and certainty that we have classified in an earlier chapter;³⁰ but in the passages we are examining here, the ideas of will or certainty are not formally enunciated, and Bach expresses them only as commentary on the text that he is provided. However, the interpretation has even more interest for us since we find a doubly expressive effect in it—on one hand, the immediate translation of the words; and on the other, the evocation of a state of soul that, without being explained by the words themselves, will be directly revealed by the music. This complex interpretive activity appears particularly in the soprano aria “Cast, O my heart, cast thyself yet into the loving

³⁰ See ex. 2.1 and preceding text.

arms of the Most High, that he may have mercy on thee” from the cantata *Mein Gott, wie lang*. The beginning of the aria has a rhythm full of momentum; large melodic movements abound and all is broad and passionate. But at the end of the seventh measure of her vocal line, the soprano abruptly passes from major to minor and introduces a new rhythm that obstinately attaches itself to the note that suddenly disrupted the key and is repeated insistently. By darkening the melodic line through this obsession with the altered note, Bach has evidently wanted to give the phrase a tone of supplication, reproducing the pitiful accents and the tenacious moans of a wretched soul’s implorations. But there is something more. This relentlessness in the vocal part brings to mind Jacob’s fervent prayer when he clasps the angel, crying “I will not release you until you have blessed me.” We might even say that the memory of this biblical scene has arisen in Bach’s mind and inspired him. When the text speaks to him of “throwing ourselves into the arms of the Most High to gain his mercy” (ex. 7.7), the energy of his longing revives the struggle with the patriarch: he wants to take hold of God and possess His grace. This Christian, with a soul full of sermons and a mind nourished by mystical readings, reminds us here of the oft-repeated maxim on the subject of heaven: “et violenti rapiunt illud” (and the violent take it by force).



in des Höchsten Lie - besar - me, dass er dei - ner sich er - bar - - me
 into the Most-High's arms-of-love, that he on thee have mercy
 (into the loving arms of the Most-High, that he have mercy on thee)

Ex. 7.7. *Mein Gott, wie lang, ach lange*, BWV 155/4, mm. 15–18.

Likewise, in the cantata *Ich habe genug*, when the aged Simeon sings “I have taken the Savior, the hope of the godly, in my eager arms,” Bach restricts the melodic line and gives it a similar insistence. So it would seem that he adds a kind of rugged pride to the joy of the holy man who has finally seen the long-awaited Messiah—a pride from having borne this bare and simple hope, and from having held this divine misery as if it were a feeble child entrusted to his arms—as a symbol and proof of imminent and total possession by Almighty God. As for his hope, Simeon is intoxicated by its very power, and he is in the highest state of rapture. His delirium knows no greater bounds, and his song remains even and taut in steadfast exaltation (ex. 7.8).

(Ich habe) den Hei-land, das Hof-fen der Frommen, auf mei-ne be-
 I have the Savior, the hope of the godly, in my eager
 (I have taken the Savior, the hope of the godly, in my eager

gie-ri-gen Ar-me ge-nommen
 arms taken
 arms)

Ex. 7.8. *Ich habe genug*, BWV 82/1, mm. 66–73.

In the cantata *Herr, deine Augen sehen nach dem Glauben*, a motif that seems similar—but is in dissonance with its accompaniment from the very first note—proclaims the obstinacy of the impenitent sinner who brings God’s wrath upon himself. Although the situation is very different, Bach still wants to depict a feeling of doggedness as in the preceding passages, and it is not surprising that he uses the same device in this vocal line (ex. 7.9).

Du a-ber nach dei-nem ver-stock-ten und un-buss-fer-ti-gen
 Thou, however, because of thy obstinate and impatient

Her-zen häu-fest dir selbst den Zorn auf den Tag des Zorns
 heart heapest up for thyself wrath on the day of wrath

Ex. 7.9. *Herr, deine Augen sehen nach dem Glauben*, BWV 102/4, mm. 78–89.

This insistence is also manifest in the benediction arias, such as the alto aria “Blessed are ye, ye elect souls” in the cantata *O ewiges Feuer*.³¹

We should note that this expressive resource was also employed before Bach. We find remarkable examples of these persistent motifs in the works of Johann Wolfgang Franck, who sometimes repeats the same note in a melisma that unfolds on a single word, followed by similar melodic groupings between them; sometimes he repeats a musical fragment on different words; and sometimes, to better accentuate the expression of certain passages, he repeats both words and

³¹ BWV 34/3, mm. 9–23.

music. I cite here a phrase from his arrangement for soprano of the chorale *Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut* (Lord Jesus Christ, thou highest good).

On the next-to-last word of the clause “Have mercy on me with my great burden,” the melisma maneuvers around the E flat, which thus takes on an odd quality of steadiness that the accompaniment renders even more poignant through its harmonic diversity (ex. 7.10).

Er-barm - - - e - - dich mein in sol - -
Have mercy on me who has such -

cher Last
a burden

Ex. 7.10. Johann Wolfgang Franck, *Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut*, mm 27–32.³²

In the opera *Aeneas* (1680), Franck shows his intent to stress certain words by repeating the same melodic line. He renders more pressing the exhortation to be calm and pretend, which is expressed by the words “Do not complain that she has wounded your heart; conceal your feeling, and act as if you wish to flee,” etc. The advice is given in an insinuating but obstinate manner—rather gently at first, then with a little more vivacity the third time—and the phrase culminates with a sudden cadence, sung twice, duplicating both words and music (ex. 7.11).

so kla - ge nicht zur Stun - de, dass sie dein Herz ver - vun - det, ver -
so do not complain at this hour, that she thy heart wounded,

stel - - - le, ver - stel - le dei - ne brust, ver - stel - le dei - ne brust
conceal, conceal thy feeling, conceal thy feeling

Ex. 7.11. Johann Franck, *Aeneas Ankunft in Italien*, aria 11, mm. 6–10.

³² Motets in the manuscript collection of the Wolfenbüttel library (294, No. IX).

Progression

The expressive intensity of these motivic repetitions increases again when the music progressively rises, as in portraying the growing exaltation of feeling interpreted by a climbing vocal line. It is a fact of experience that the pitch of speech rises more and more in proportion to the passion behind it, and J. F. Reichardt reports that Bach had the habit of observing gradations in pitch in a beggar's increasingly exasperated plea when made to wait for alms that Bach had encouraged him to hope for. In such anecdotes there is nearly always a grain of truth, but fabricating a story out of it often exaggerates or falsifies it completely. Reichardt published this tale in 1796 (*Musikalischer Almanach*, Berlin)³³ when Bach had been dead for forty-six years; so it was easy to surround him with legends, without fear of being accused of error, when witnesses of his life had already reached an age at which people like to give an illusory accuracy to their recollections of youth to better imagine it coming to life again. Had Reichardt been aware of this detail of Bach's personal life for a long time? I do not know, but I should note that in a work published five years earlier Reichardt cites a passage by Quintilian that wonderfully supports this little tale, and he did not make use of it then. In this work entitled *Geist des musikalischen Kunstmagazins* (Berlin, 1791),³⁴ he quotes Quintilian, as saying that "the voice is the herald of the soul" and that "if the passion mounts, the voice rises; if the passion subsides, the voice lowers." At its heart, Reichardt's account of Bach and the beggar contains nothing more than this, even though he also claims in it that, after having gotten the beggar to plead more and more loudly, Bach appeased him little by little by giving him very meager coins at first, and then put an end to the jeremiad with an unusual largess, which, to Bach's great delight, led to a resolution resembling a perfect cadence.³⁵

I cite this tale only with the greatest mistrust; however, it is always possible that Bach had remarked to his pupils that the degree of desire, even in everyday speech, reveals itself through some version of rising modulation. Certainly, his precursors had already observed this long before him. One instance of such an increase is shown by the soprano's gradual soaring in the invocation "miserere nobis" from the last "Agnus Dei" in Orlando di Lasso's mass *Douce Mémoire* (Pleasant remembrance); and, in his motet *Domine, convertere* (Lord, transform), Lasso develops the melody of the "salvum me fac" (save me) through an identical procedure.³⁶ For Schütz, a progressive rising of the melody is both a lyrical resource and an expressive one. Among numerous examples, it suffices to mention here the particular motifs that he combines with the words "His praise

³³ Cited by Spitta, *J. S. Bach*, 2:746.

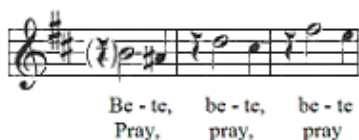
³⁴ Johann Friedrich Reichardt, *Geist des musikalischen Kunstmagazins* (Berlin: 1791), 176–77.

³⁵ Spitta, *J. S. Bach*, 2:746.

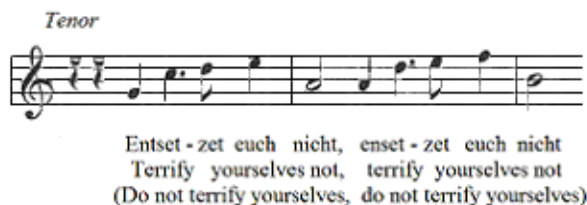
³⁶ The editions by Charles Bordes have spread these works widely.

must always be on my lips” in the short sacred chorus *Ich will den Herren loben allezeit* (I will praise the Lord at all times)³⁷ and those that are repeated exultantly in the duet “Erhöre mich” (Hear me)³⁸ when joined to the prayer “Hear me, hear me.”

Whether or not Bach had actually performed the act described in Reichardt’s tale, it remains no less certain that in his works he followed his forerunners by using this form of expression, which gives so much power to a declamation. In the soprano aria of the cantata *Mache dich, mein Geist, bereit*, the exhortation to pray rises, degree by degree, like prayer itself (ex. 7.12a); and in the tenor aria from the cantata *Denn du wirst meine Seele nicht in der Hölle lassen*, consoling words are also repeated a step higher on the same vocal motif (ex. 7.12b).



Ex. 7.12a. *Mache dich, mein Geist, bereit*, BWV 115/4, mm. 14–16.

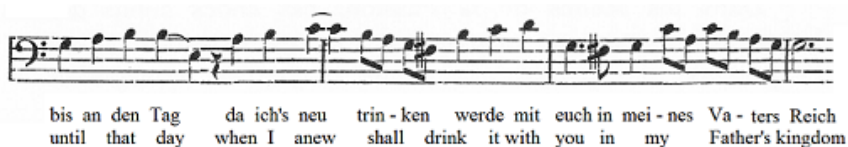


Ex. 7.12b. *Denn du wirst meine Seele nicht in der Hölle lassen*, BWV 15/4, mm. 6–8.

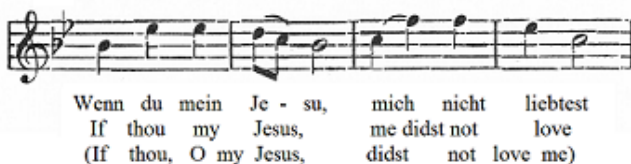
At times, the progression of the vocal line shows a growing feeling without repeating the words. We find this happens at the end of the recitative in the *St. Matthew Passion* where Jesus institutes the Holy Supper and invokes the day he will be reunited with his apostles in his Father’s kingdom (ex. 7.13a). And while the repetitions of the motif in this speech are majestically rapturous, other, less ample repetitions also lend a penetrating tenderness to the melodic line joined to these words mingled with love and anguish: “If thou, O my Jesus, didst not love me, then I would suffer more greatly than from the pain of hell” (ex. 7.13b).

³⁷ Heinrich Schütz, *Kleine geistliche Konzerte*, ed. Spitta, *Sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1885–1927), vol. 6, pt. 2, no. 1.

³⁸ Schütz, *Kleine geistliche Konzerte*, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6, pt. 1, no. 8.



Ex. 7.13a. *St. Matthew Passion*, BWV 244/1/17, mm. 36–40.



Ex. 7.13b. *Selig ist der Mann*, BWV 57/3, mm. 109–112.

* * *

Important Words

By merely shortening musical phrases, Bach can emphasize words he deems important; this serves him as a way to separate these words from others in the text so that they burst forth with greater energy. He readily uses this declamatory device to invigorate the injunctions expressed by the choir. Thus, at the beginning of the first chorus from the cantata *Sehet, welch eine Liebe hat uns der Vater erzeiget* the four voices enunciate, in two large chords, the word “*sehet*” (behold), after which the sopranos alone continue the pictorial theme that the other parts will successively state, following the usual contrapuntal procedure.³⁹ “Behold” is also expressed this same way in the first chorus from the *St. Matthew Passion*;⁴⁰ furthermore, it is through these sudden interjections from the chorus and these dialogues between groups of voices that the opening of this Passion takes such a powerfully dramatic turn. The calls and the questionings intersect each other, as in a crowd’s uproar at a game where something very dear to them is at stake. In the bass aria “Hasten, troubled souls” from the earlier *St. John Passion*, the people’s outcries are also heard. By repeatedly asking “*Wohin?*” (where?), they pave the way for the bass’s response—“*nach Golgatha*” (to Golgotha).⁴¹

In scenes from this Passion, such sudden harmonic jolts give an extraordinarily tragic impulse to the expression of the words, and Bach sometimes uses the same means to show contrasts of ideas or feelings in other choruses, thus

³⁹ BWV 64/1, mm. 1–13.

⁴⁰ BWV 244/1, mm. 26–29 et seq.

⁴¹ BWV 245/24, mm. 48–64.

rousing our attention so that we can better perceive the antitheses through the music. When, in the first chorus in the cantata *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*, the voices have finished the first clause—"I had much grief in my heart"—the choir instantly prepares for "thy consolations revive my soul" with a "but" ("aber"), vigorously sung by all four voice parts on a dominant seventh chord that makes us long for a continuation and astonishes with a lengthy strangeness that only leaves us in suspense, curious to know what this sudden warning holds in store.⁴² In the first chorus from the cantata *Es ist dir gesagt, Mensch, was gut ist* (It has been told you, O Man, what good is), the voices accentuate the same word, "nämlich" (namely), before explaining, in the second part of the chorus's text, "what is good and what the Lord demands of you, *namely*: hold to God's word, practice love, and be humble before your God."⁴³

In recitatives and arias, Bach similarly isolates words that forestall a transformation of the idea that is about to be stated—as in imperative or explanatory expressions. For instance, the adverb "doch" (yet) is frequently articulated on a note that is followed by a silence. Examples include the bass recitative in the cantata *Wo soll ich fliehen hin*,⁴⁴ the soprano recitative in the cantata *Meine Seufzer*,⁴⁵ and the alto aria in the cantata *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin*.⁴⁶ There is no need to multiply examples of this declamatory peculiarity, however, I could cite an infinite number of them.⁴⁷ The same hiatus can be found after the word "allein" (yet), for which I point to the soprano recitative in the cantata *Was soll ich aus dir machen, Ephraim?*⁴⁸ and the alto recitative in the cantata *Ich elender Mensch*.⁴⁹ Bach similarly inserts a silence after the word "siehe" (behold), at the beginning of the cantata *Siehe, ich will viel Fischer aussenden*.⁵⁰

This manner of emphasizing certain words is traditional in German recitative. In his treatise on music, Daniel Speer observes that pauses serve to adorn a composition: "For, when coming upon words that convey something that elicits reflection or is new or astonishing—or even when monosyllables appear such as "ah," "oh," "come," "peace," "look," etc.—listeners feel a definite emotion, and their attention is heightened when these words are followed by a

⁴² BWV 21/1, mm. 35–39.

⁴³ BWV 45/1, mm. 94–116. Nicolaus Niedt uses an analogous means in his composition on the same words in his previously cited collection *Musicalische Sonn- und Fest-Tags-Lust* (Sondershausen: 1698).

⁴⁴ BWV 5/2, mm. 4–6.

⁴⁵ BWV 13/4, mm. 9–11.

⁴⁶ BWV 125/2, mm. 62–68.

⁴⁷ See also the alto recitative from the cantata *Widerstehe doch der Sünde* (BWV 54/2, mm. 1–5).

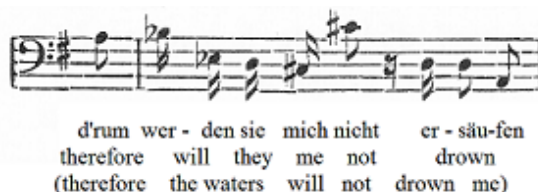
⁴⁸ BWV 89/4, mm. 5–8.

⁴⁹ BWV 48/2, mm. 8–10.

⁵⁰ BWV 88/1, mm. 19–21.

pause.”⁵¹ Johann Kuhnau, Bach’s predecessor at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, applies this rule in his cantatas—for example, in the recitative from his cantata for solo bass *Erschrickt mein Herz vor dir* (My heart is terrified before you) on the word “allein” (alone) and in the cantata for the Feast of the Ascension of 1714 on the word “jedoch” (however).⁵²

With this same means, Bach stresses the first words of the phrase “thy gold . . . is a transient possession” by separating the subject from the verb.⁵³ In the recitative with chorale in the following passage from the cantata *Ich hab in Gottes Herz und Sinn* (I have surrendered to God’s heart and mind) he interrupts the regular course of the clause to bear down on the most forceful word (ex. 7.14a), and in the tenor recitative from the cantata *Ich lasse dich nicht*, a brief silence isolates the last words—on which Bach wants the voice to lean: “Thy blessing remain . . . with me” (ex. 7.14b).



Ex. 7.14a. *Ich hab in Gottes Herz und Sinn*, BWV 92/2, mm. 19–20.



Ex. 7.14b. *Ich lasse dich nicht*, BWV 157/3, mm. 12–13.

At the end of the first chorus in the cantata *Wer sich selbst erhöht, der soll erniedriget werden* Bach divides the text as if to emphasize each word with the deliberate stress of a popular orator by halting the voices after the word “und” (and), which links the first clause to the words “whoever humbles himself, he shall be exalted”⁵⁴—an interruption in the discourse that compares, perhaps, to the one

⁵¹ Speer, *Grundrichtiger, kurz-, und nöthiger, jetzt wolvermehrter Unterricht der musikalischen Kunst* (Ulm: 1697), 283.

⁵² City of Leipzig library, nos. 117 and 119.

⁵³ BWV 64/3, mm. 7–9.

⁵⁴ BWV 47/1, mm. 209–213.

we examined earlier in the first chorus from the cantata *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*. In both cases, the same intention to mark the opposition between the two parts of the sentence is apparent.

Expressive Role of the Vocal Lines

It is even more interesting to observe that sometimes the musical phrase itself remains suspended. In fact, in many cases the voice never concludes in the normal manner on the tonic, and the melodic line does not end as usual with repose, but with something uncertain and incomplete that disturbs its conclusion. A chorus in the funeral cantata *Actus tragicus* ends in this indefinite way: the voices accompanying the soprano's lyrical recitative are suddenly silenced after having unceasingly predicted man's unavoidable death. The last chord they form is not consonant, and the soloist continues her entreaties to Jesus, which are mingled with unsettled chords in the violas da gamba; she ends her last phrase on the third of the key, after the orchestral bass has stopped murmuring the fundamental, so that the mystery of the waning soul has an even more elusive character. Nothing else remains after the voice expires, leaving this pale harmony to fade away in a great, deliberately extended silence.⁵⁵ At the end of the first chorus in the cantata *Herr, wie du willst* the four voice parts end on a dissonance—as if expressing man's powerlessness to resolve his uncertainty in the face of God's will.⁵⁶

Often Bach lets the voice and orchestra sustain a dissonant chord in the middle of an aria, as if by arresting the logical progression of the vocal line he seeks to invite the listener into formless and limitless reverie. He does this on the words "in peace" in the tenor aria from the cantata *Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwölfe*.⁵⁷ In the tenor aria from the cantata *Schau, lieber Gott* the vocal line likewise stops on the word "Ruhr" (rest), and the held note ends on a diminished seventh chord whose length is extended by a fermata.⁵⁸ Also, the tenor recitative from the cantata *Ich glaube, lieber Herr* culminates in a vocal line whose last note is at intervals of a seventh from the note played by the bass and at a fourth from the expected tonic (ex. 7.15).

⁵⁵ Cantata *Gottes Zeit* (BWV 106/2d, mm. 50–55).

⁵⁶ BWV 73/1, mm. 71–73.

⁵⁷ BWV 22/4, mm. 52–64.

⁵⁸ BWV 153/6, mm. 22–24.

Tenor *Adagio*

forte

Ach Herr! wie lan - - - - - ge?
 Ah Lord! how long - - - - - ?

Ex. 7.15. *Ich glaube, lieber Herr*, BWV 109/2, mm. 15–17.

In some arias that end with a question, the voice does not conclude on the tonic of the key. This irregularity can be heard in the second soprano aria of the cantata *Selig ist der Mann*⁵⁹ and in the bass arioso of the cantata *Herr, deine Augen sehen nach dem Glauben*.⁶⁰

In these last arias, Bach applies a general rule followed by composers who wished to imitate the inflections of ordinary speech when the voice naturally rises at the end of a question.⁶¹ In his *Gradus ad Parnassum*, J. J. Fux specifies various musical formulas for interrogation.⁶² Several years later, in *Kern melodischer Wissenschaft* (1737), Mattheson observes that “in fact, in everyday speech the voice always rises with a question, but in melody there are many circumstances that not only permit exceptions on this point but often demand them.” He adds that we must be wary of apparent interrogatives and only employ the interrogative form in the vocal line if the text truly expresses questioning.⁶³

We only need to examine a few examples to show that Bach is faithful to the custom. In the soprano recitative of the cantata *Aus tiefer Not* an admirable interrogative formula is displayed when joined to the words “What? Knowest thou not thy helper?” (ex. 7.16a). We can compare it with this reproach in the *Christmas Oratorio*: “What should frighten me about the horror of death?” (ex. 7.16b).

Wie? Kennst du deinen Hel-fer nicht?
 What? Knowest thou not thy helper?

Ex. 7.16a. *Aus tiefer Not*, BWV 38/4, mm. 7–9.

⁵⁹ BWV 57/7, mm. 220–230.

⁶⁰ BWV 102/4, mm. 132–147.

⁶¹ See Jules Combarieu, *Les Rapports de la Musique et de la Poésie* (Paris: 1893), 38.

⁶² Johann Joseph Fux, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, German trans. Mizler (Leipzig: 1742), 195.

⁶³ Johannes Mattheson, *Kern melodischer Wissenschaft* (Hamburg: 1737), 89. See also Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, 181, 192.



Was jag-te mir zu-letzt der Tod für Grauen ein?
 What frightens me least is death for horror?
 (What should frighten me about the horror of death?)

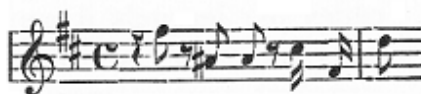
Ex. 7.16b. *Christmas Oratorio*, BWV 248/38, mm. 22–23.

We should note again the beginning of the bass recitative “Why is it that ye sought me?” from the cantata *Liebster Jesu, mein Verlangen* (ex. 7.17a). Momus’s question “What, Midas, are you mad?” also takes an ascending form in the *Dramma per Musica* whose subject is the dispute between Phoebus and Pan (ex. 7.17b).



Was ist's? was ist's, dass ihr mich ge - su-chet?
 Why is it? why is it, that ye me sought?
 (Why is it that ye sought me?)

Ex. 7.17a. *Liebster Jesu, mein Verlangen*, BWV 32/2, mm. 1–2.



Wie, My-das, bist du toll?
 What, Midas, are you mad?

Ex. 7.17b. *Der Streit zwischen Phoebus und Pan*, BWV 201/12, mm. 1–2.

To give more power to an interrogation we have seen that Bach is not afraid to break with the usually respected custom of ending the melodic line on the tonic and that he goes as far as ending a recitative on a dissonance. Likewise, he just as readily defies the old rule that ordains beginning every composition with a consonance⁶⁴—even when what the words express suggests it to him. We find the most remarkable example of such daring at the very beginning of the cantata *Widerstehe doch der Sünde*: “Resist indeed sin.”⁶⁵ And in the tenor aria from the cantata *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes* the vocal line includes the interval of

⁶⁴ See my work *Descartes et la Musique* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1907).

⁶⁵ BWV 54/1, mm. 11–12.

an augmented fourth on the word "hate" ("Hasse") at the beginning of the phrase "Hate, then, hate me thoroughly, hostile generation!"⁶⁶

In the final recitative of the cantata *Ich habe meine Zuversicht*, the strings precede the vocal line with a tremolo on a dominant-seventh chord.⁶⁷ The bass recitative in the cantata *Ein feste Burg* also opens with a dissonance before the words "Ponder indeed, O child of God, this love so great,"⁶⁸ and here the dissonance serves to give more solemnity to the beginning of the recitative by summoning us to a more energetic attention. Also, in the third verse of the motet *Jesu, meine Freude* (Jesu, priceless treasure), the five voices begin the phrase "defiance to the ancient serpent" on a forceful seventh chord.⁶⁹

These are the principal resources of Bach's musical speech considered from the point of view of phrase formation. But before abandoning our study of these elements of his inventiveness, we must still examine one of the procedures through which he reveals his desire to make the ideas shine forth that seem principal to him in a text; so we will expressly point out the words that prompt his use of this particular procedure. I am speaking of melismas, whose role in 17th- and 18th-century music is very important. Misled by the abuses of Italian virtuosity, we are accustomed to regard melismas only as empty and outdated ornaments to the melodic line. But if we return to the very origin of deeply meaningful music we see that the melismas of the first masters of recitative are both supple and lyrical. They were used especially to describe external actions, and also to represent, by analogy, movements of the soul. We have already examined a large number of melismas in the examples quoted in the account of Bach's vocabulary, and it is hardly necessary to provide new ones here. To have Bach's principal types of melismas in mind one need only skim through the preceding chapters to review the themes of doubt,⁷⁰ haste,⁷¹ and especially the themes of force⁷² and joy.⁷³ But we want to observe how he uses these great words of the musical language because we cannot conceive of treating indifferently these broad arabesques that compel us to listen as they adorn the words with a radiance of notes. In his *Critica Musica*, Johann Mattheson writes, with good reason, that if "the repetition of an insignificant word is foolish, it is even more nonsensical to add a melisma to such a word."⁷⁴ Sometimes, we must acknowledge that composers allow themselves to be carried away in placing the melismas almost at random. They only take into account the beautiful sonority of certain vowels on

⁶⁶ BWV 76/10, mm. 10–13.

⁶⁷ BWV 188/5, mm. 1–2.

⁶⁸ BWV 80/3, mm. 1–2.

⁶⁹ BWV 227/3/3, mm. 1–4.

⁷⁰ Ex. 2.20 and preceding text.

⁷¹ Exs. 3.28a–g and preceding text.

⁷² Ex. 3.33 and preceding text.

⁷³ Exs. 3.22a, b; 3.35a–d; 3.36a–g.

⁷⁴ Johannes Mattheson, *Critica musica* (Hamburg: 1725), 2: 376.

which a singer's virtuosity can gracefully display itself; and at the end of an aria they unfurl their flourishes like a professional letter-writer's swirling initials at the bottom of a page. Bach has not entirely escaped these practices of his day, and he recognizes very well, with Printz and the majority of composers, that "the vowels 'a, e, o,' and the diphthongs begun by these vowels, allow a wonderful coloring."⁷⁵ However, we should note that in an infinite number of cases the suppleness of Bach's imagination saves him, and even where a breach appears, his ingeniousness in applying the inflection redeems him. He does not know how to transgress as mediocre composers do.

Moreover, many melismas can unfold on the favorable vowels without sacrificing any expression in the words or order in the discourse. The examples I have already provided attest to this. Who would not recognize the rightness of style—their monotonous and ponderous melancholy—of the melismas on the word "Sorgen" (cares)? The vowel "o," on which the notes float or spin themselves out certainly facilitates their somber expansiveness, but that vowel surely would not have elicited them if the meaning of the word and its place in the sentence had not allowed Bach to offer an image through the singing—as opposed to a mere exercise for the singer (exs. 7.18a, b):



Ex. 7.18a. *Ach Gott, wie manches Herzeleid I*, BWV 3/5, mm. 9–11.



Ex. 7.18b. *In allen meinen Taten*, BWV 97/8, mm. 43–49.

In the second of these two melismas in particular, Bach's expressive intention is admirably revealed by the rhythmic disturbance of the motif and by the

⁷⁵ Printz, *Phrynidis Myrtilenaei . . . erster Theil*, 114.

uniformity of the pattern, which darkens by modulating into the minor and ends wearily. This example reveals even better Bach's intention to seek an effect of feeling here: his interpretation of the verb "sorgen" (cares) is exaggerated—all things considered—since the text simply says "To die or to live, whenever he bids me. Whether it be today or tomorrow, *I let him care about that*; He knows the proper time."

On the other hand, there is something slightly routine in the constancy with which Bach almost always decorates the words "alles" and "alle" (all) with a melisma. Certainly the "a" resounds magnificently in them, and there is a kind of fullness in the very meaning of the word to which redundancy is never unbecoming. Heinrich Schütz had already delighted in unfurling long lines on the first syllable of this adjective;⁷⁶ but Mattheson questions the usefulness of extensive sequences of notes on "alles."⁷⁷ Although Bach often employs such sequences without sufficient reason, he nonetheless knows how to produce, through the very excess of melismas joined to the word "alles," extraordinary effects of tumultuous plenitude. The enormous scrolls traced by the voices in the first chorus from the cantata *Alles nur nach Gottes Willen* are not only wide-ranging scales on the vowel "a," they also correspond to the arpeggios and swirling patterns in the orchestra and enhance the stormy coloring at the beginning of the cantata.⁷⁸ In the aria that ends the first part of the cantata *Geist und Seele wird verwirret* we also find extended melismas on "Alles,"⁷⁹ just as we do in the tenor aria from the cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen*.⁸⁰ In these two examples, the value of the great tirades is purely ornamental, just as they are in a number of other cases that we do not have space to consider here.

As for the descriptive melisma, we have already dealt with it earlier as I have said; so I will only point out here melismas on the word "Flammen" (flames), where Bach not only uses to advantage the broad sonority of the vowel "a" but also attempts to describe the flame's agile biting and crackling. These passages are taken from the tenor aria in the cantata *O Ewigkeit*, (7.19a) and the bass aria in the cantata *Ach, ich sehe* (7.19b).

⁷⁶ See, for example, the little sacred chorus *Ich will den Herren loben allezeit* (Schütz, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 6, pt. 2, no. 1).

⁷⁷ Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, 203.

⁷⁸ BWV 72/1, mm. 17–22 et seq.

⁷⁹ BWV 35/4, mm. 8–16, 54–56, 57–63.

⁸⁰ BWV 12/6, mm. 25–28.



Ex. 7.19a. *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort! I*, BWV 20/3, mm. 44–46.



Ex. 7.19b. *Ach! ich sehe, itzt, da ich zur Hochzeit gehe*, BWV 162/1, mm. 27–29.

Among the lyrical melismas, I can cite again those in the soprano aria “Alleluja!” of the cantata *Jauchzet Gott*⁸¹ and those given to the same word in the tenor and alto arias of the cantata *Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir*.⁸²

* * *

Major and Minor Modes

Before passing on to studying the musical forms that Bach employs, we must speak briefly again of the characters he attributes to the major and minor modes, and we must examine the expressive tasks he assigns to the different voices.

To examine the first subject, we need not determine if all Bach’s major-tonality compositions are joyous, or if all those he writes in minor are sad. Such a classification would be almost childish and would produce only mediocre results. In fact, certain very sorrowful choruses or arias are sung in a major key,⁸³ and certain cheerful arias are in a minor mode.⁸⁴ It is only when the major and minor are found directly opposed to each other in the same composition that we can

⁸¹ BWV 51/5, mm. 1–17.

⁸² BWV 29/1, mm. 20–24; /7, mm. 1–4.

⁸³ For example, the alto aria from *Sehet, wir gehn hinauf gen Jerusalem* (BWV 159/2).

⁸⁴ Such is the tenor aria “Frohe Hirten” from the *Christmas Oratorio* (BWV 248/15). Notice, however, that in a general way Bach observes the expressive distinction between major and minor, and to render this opposition more apparent we will cite some examples later where the antithesis is strict.

establish with certainty a significant antagonism. We are then in a position to observe what Kircher calls the mutation of the mode, which, according to him, “has a great power of expression” (“magnam emphasin”) and produces in its listeners “notable alterations of feeling.” As evidence of this claim, he transcribes a dialogue in which Giacomo Carissimi—“the very celebrated choir prefect at the German College”—represents, in his own way, the tears of Heraclitus and the laughter of Democritus. Here is the beginning of this “paradigm of metabolic style” (ex. 7.20).

The image displays a musical score for a vocal piece by Giacomo Carissimi. It consists of two systems of music. Each system has a treble staff for the voice and a bass staff for the basso continuo. The first system is in 3/4 time. The voice part begins with a half note 'E', followed by a quarter note 'pur', and then a series of eighth notes 'da ri - - - de - re'. The basso continuo part has a half note 'E', followed by a quarter note 'pur', and then a series of eighth notes 'da ri - - - de - re'. The lyrics are 'E pur da ri - - - de - re' and 'And yet it makes you laugh'. The second system continues the melody with lyrics 'pian - - - ge - - re' and 'makes you cry'. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and fingerings.

Ex. 7.20. Giacomo Carissimi, in Kircher: *Musurgia universalis*, VII/9, p. 673, mm. 1–11.

In the melisma joined to the word “sorgen” (cares) that I cited several pages earlier, we have seen the melodic line darken in this way, and in the alto aria of the cantata *Ach, lieben Christen, seid getrost*, Bach gives a sudden gravity to the end of this sentence evoking death, the deliverer who brings an emancipation that is paid for with suffering: “No longer dost thou make me afraid, O death; If I can only attain freedom through thee, then I must indeed die one day.” This mixture of boldness and fear has an admirable verity of feeling. Here again, Bach completes his text and makes us imagine what the words do not avow—the inevitable terror of death’s unpredictability, which the promises of consolation are not enough to deflect (ex. 7.21).

accompaniment by bright chords when, after having reproached the soul for its torpor, the singer cries out “Rouse thyself!”⁸⁷

The Different Voices

Turning now to Bach’s use of the different voices, we must note that he reserves for each of them the role that best suits its nature. G. B. Doni recommends, in his treatise on theatrical music, assigning each player a voice in keeping with its character. According to him it is desirable that Jesus be represented by a tenor “of ordinary tone”—this voice being one that befits a well-built body. God, the Father, “always represented in the form of an old man,” could not be better represented than by a baritone. Angels will have soprano voices, and the prince of demons, who is customarily depicted as “large and bearded,” will sing in a deep bass and will be accompanied by several low instruments of odd sonority. Doni continues his enumeration, having the gods of Olympus follow the angels and demons, and concludes by entrusting the contralto with the task of portraying Bellone, “goddess of war,” while giving the sopranos the mission of playing Ceres, Juno, Venus, Minerva, and leaving to the higher sopranos the roles of Diana and Proserpina.⁸⁸

Bach agrees somewhat with Doni on this principle: that one should first seek the coloring in each voice that attunes with the feeling rendered by the words. But in applying this idea, he contradicts the Italian critic nearly everywhere.⁸⁹ Doni sees the *dramatis personae*, places them on stage, and groups them in scenes where they appear very ready for action with the countenances and attributes that painters have so often reproduced. But Bach never has this theatrical view, and it is souls that he prefers to describe. He does not need to imagine God as an old man with a

⁸⁷ BWV 115/2, mm. 54–60. Bach confines himself to this very modern usage when employing ancient keys expressively. At the beginning of the 18th century, they had fallen almost entirely into disuse. Andreas Werckmeister wrote (p. 55) in his *Harmonologia musica* (1702): “We only wish to deal briefly here with the twelve modes on which our chords and other pieces are still sometimes based: today we would be able to manage well with two modes.” However, several pages further on, he recognizes the necessity of understanding the modes well in order to accompany the old chorales suitably and to create well-adapted preludes from them (p. 59). In his *Musicalischer Trichter* (1706), M. H. Fuhrmann reports that Johann Rosenmüller (1619–1684) allows for only two modes, Ionian and Dorian (major and minor) that, he says, contain all the others (p. 41). Handel wrote to Mattheson from London on February 24, 1719 “But, as we are liberated from the strict limitations of ancient music, I do not see what use the Greek modes can be for modern music.” (Mattheson, *Critica musica*, 2:211).

⁸⁸ Giovanni Battista Doni, *Trattato dell Musica scenica*, complete works (1633–35), 2:86.

⁸⁹ In the *Dramma per Musica: Tönet, ihr Pauken!* (BWV 214), Bellone is a soprano. Diana, however, sings the high part in the cantata *Was mir behagt* (BWV 208). Moreover, it is very probable that Bach did not know this work by Doni. I only cite it to show that the idea of characterizing the different voices was already current.

deep voice, but he does make Him speak with the full strength of the Almighty, in a serious and troubling tone—for example when God asks, in the cantata *Was soll ich aus dir machen, Ephraim?*, “O Ephraim, what shall I make of thee?”⁹⁰ In the cantata *Siehe, ich will viel Fischer aussenden*, Jesus reassures Peter—not in the tenor voice that Doni imagined, but in a bass voice with a large, firm tone.⁹¹ Moreover, Christ sings in this same voice in the *St. Matthew* and *St. John* Passions, and when Bach wants the voice of the Holy Spirit to be heard, he does this again, with the bass singing in a calm sonority—without passion but full of mercy—to declare to us these words of consolation: “Peace be to those who die for the Lord.” The cantata based on the chorale *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort! II*, in which the voice of the Holy Spirit sings, is also very interesting for studying Bach’s expressive use of the different vocal timbres.⁹² In this work, each of the singers plays, as it were, a role. The alto represents “Fear,” the tenor is “Hope,” and the bass is “the Voice of the Holy Spirit.” We will not analyze this cantata, which carries the subtitle *Dialogus* (Dialogue), but I should point out that the same allegorical figures of fear and hope are likewise portrayed by the alto and tenor in the cantata *Erfreut euch, ihr Herzen*.⁹³ On the other hand, in the trio from the *Christmas Oratorio*, the alto expresses the tranquil joy of certainty while the tenor and soprano are preyed upon by doubt and desire.⁹⁴ There would seem to be a contradiction between this trio, in which the alto sings of peace, and the other cantatas we have been citing in which the alto speaks of fright; but this is not the case. As Arnold Schering superbly states, “each time a situation reaches the highest point, whether it be in sorrow or calm joy, Bach resorts to the alto voice and achieves some striking effects. It is this voice that utters pleas for mercy with the greatest insistence. Its dark tone expresses human feelings most truthfully, and the most passionate and penetrating arias are written for it.” And Schering refers, with just cause, to the alto arias from the *St. Matthew* and *St. John* Passions, the “Agnus Dei” from the *Mass in B Minor*, and the “Et misericordia” duet with tenor in the *Magnificat*.⁹⁵ We can also note again here the alto arias from the cantatas *Du Friedefürst, Herr Jesu Christ*,⁹⁶ *Komm, du süsse Todestunde*,⁹⁷ *Gott soll allein mein Herze haben*,⁹⁸ and others where the feeling is intimate and penetrating.

On the other hand, Bach makes use of the soprano in spirited and brilliant arias with a bright and entwining lyricism, and it is the soprano he asks to ring out

⁹⁰ BWV 89/1.

⁹¹ BWV 88/4.

⁹² BWV 60/4, mm. 4–9.

⁹³ BWV 66.

⁹⁴ BWV 248/51, mm. 21–61.

⁹⁵ Arnold Schering, *Bach's Textbehandlung* (Leipzig: 1901), 27.

⁹⁶ BWV 116/2.

⁹⁷ BWV 161/1.

⁹⁸ BWV 169/3 and 5.

the silvery arpeggios in the cantatas *Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen*⁹⁹ and *Christum wir sollen loben schon*.¹⁰⁰ All in all, Bach's most popular arias are the soprano arias—for example the “echo aria” in the *Christmas Oratorio*¹⁰¹ and the “Pentecost” aria in the cantata *Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt*.¹⁰²

As for the tenor, he possesses something of the generous voice of the violin, whose richness adapts itself to every subject. We should note, however, his special and almost liturgical function as “historian” in the Passions and in other recitatives drawn from the gospel.¹⁰³

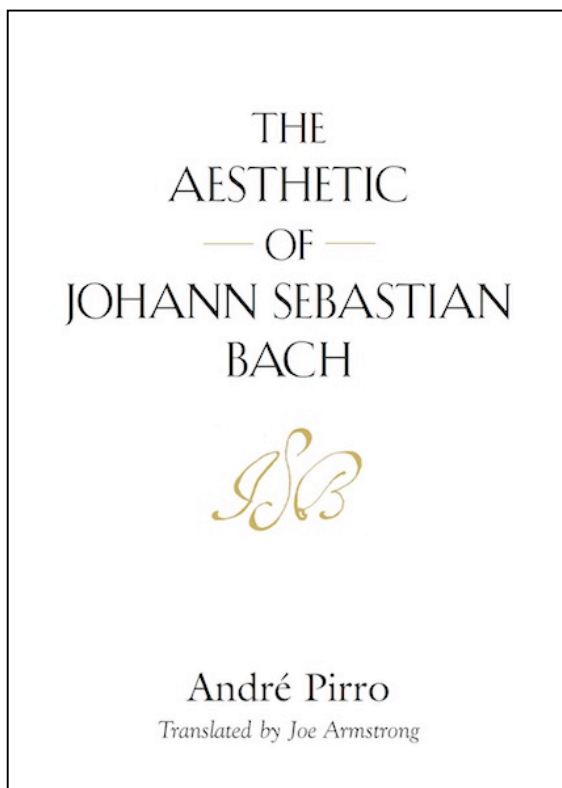
⁹⁹ BWV 51/1.

¹⁰⁰ BWV 121/5.

¹⁰¹ BWV 248/39.

¹⁰² BWV 68/2.

¹⁰³ For example, in the cantata *Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen* (BWV 11/2, 5, 7a, and 7c), in the *Christmas Oratorio*, etc.



Offered here for the first time in English, Pirro's 1907 work is considered a masterpiece by many. Its uniquely engaging analysis has informed and moved readers for more than a century, and it is now more available to all who seek greater insight into the expressive import of Bach's music.

The Aesthetic of Johann Sebastian Bach

by André Pirro, translated by Joe Armstrong

Order the complete book from the publisher

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/9921.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**