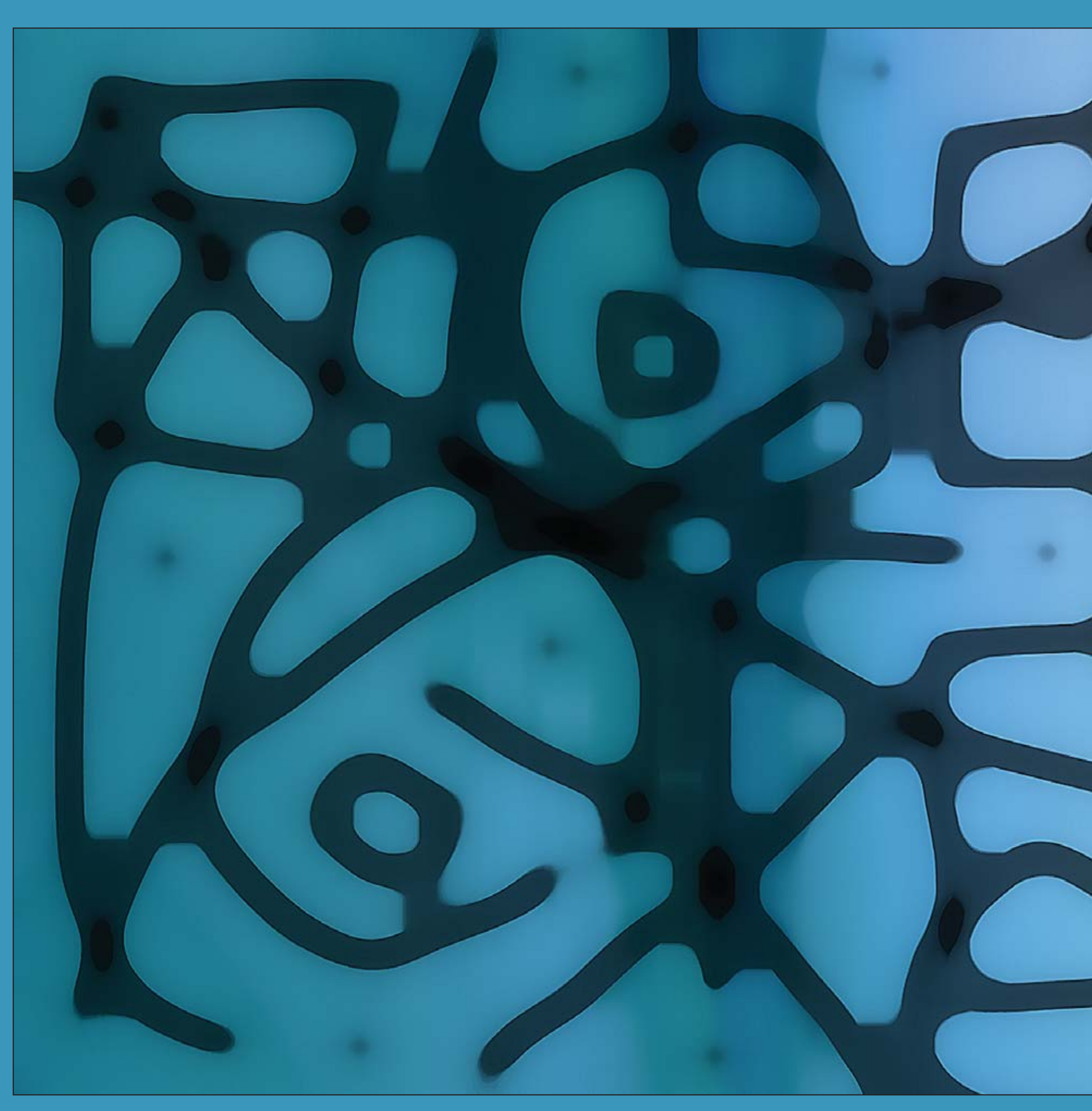
Hidden Allegory in J. S. Bach's 1724 Trinity Season Chorale Cantatas

Linda Gingrich



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A Hint of the Hidden

Johann Sebastian Bach's penchant for veiled symmetrical forms, intricate puzzles, and monumental patterns has long fascinated many musicians, including myself. The occasional intriguing glimpses of these devices in his works piqued my interest, but for a long time remained only an interest. This interest sharpened into compelling focus one day when it was pointed out to me that two of his chorale cantatas, performed within a day of one another at different church services in Leipzig, were linked in a curious way.[1] The last two measures of the first cantata contained a portion of the hymn melody that opened the second cantata, buried in the bass line, slightly varied because of the four-part harmonization, but recognizable. This hidden, almost witty allusion, which essentially made one out of two separate works, captivated me. What drove Bach to create such an esoteric coupling?

Did connections exist between other cantatas, and if so, why? This article is the result of an enthralling study of his second-cycle, Trinity season chorale cantatas, a six-month span that yields up abundant evidence of unseen linkages. Like an iceberg, these works conceal some of their substance below the surface, because the connections fuse them into interlocking pieces within a larger liturgical framework, grouped, through visible musical devices, into six elegantly invisible allegories, quasi-storylines that reflect the unseen realities of the eternal. Why Bach did this cannot be fully answered, but clues lie in Lutheran theology, the liturgical calendar, the function of musical allegory, and in the cantata connections themselves, which provide tantalizing glimpses into Bach's endless creativity and boundless imagination.

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Johann Sebastian Bach

Music, the Handmaid of Theology

The relationship between music and theology in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Lutheran Germany was close, often detailed, and vibrant. Martin Luther considered worship music highly valuable, the "handmaid of theology,"[2] a gift whose best purpose was to glorify God and serve humanity.[3] This attitude permeated the development of the Lutheran church service, forged an inseparable bond between music and worship, and stimulated the thinking of orthodox composers to a remarkable degree, especially in the area of scriptural interpretation. Since, as Luther taught, the Bible could be read both literally and as analogy, then music, theology's servant, could communicate allegorically in lockstep with theological texts.[4] Musical allegory operated as a large-scale means of expression that helped organize surface details, such as forms and tonalities, into a metaphorical manifestation, of the text. It united the tangible and the intangible qualities of music and theology, allowing them to function in tandem as signposts of eternity. A long line of Lutheran musicians, including Bach's immediate predecessor in Leipzig, Johann Kuhnau (1660–1722), embraced Luther's views, combined them with the Baroque belief in musical *affekt* and the primacy of words, and wrote about and directly allegorized theology in music.[5] Some built entire systems of musical allegory based on theology and music theory; for example, many biblical numbers, such as 3, 7, 12 and their multiples, often figured symbolically in compositions,[6] as did overriding tonal plans, tonal movement in sharp or flat directions, ascent/descent patterns, instrumentation, and polarized styles or forms. Bach was a child of his time, with a detailed command of theology at his fingertips,[7] and the Lutheran metaphysical tradition and the Baroque impulse toward the figurative ingrained in his soul. The various mottoes he penned in his scores, even his view of thorough bass, reflect his artistic heritage: "[A]nd the aim and final reason, as of all music, so of the thorough bass should be none else but the Glory of God and the recreation of the mind."[8] Allegory was a part of his musical legacy, a primary way to praise God and benefit his neighbor; it would have been surprising if he had not turned to allegorical expression in his music.[9]

The Cantata in the Lutheran Church

The chief "handmaid of theology" in the worship service was the cantata. The service, as instituted by Luther, consisted of two parts, the ministry of the Word, which contained the Bible readings and the sermon, and the ministry of the sacrament.[10] Cantatas belonged to the ministry of the Word. They fell between the Gospel reading and the sermon, providing a bridge between the two, and were considered musical sermons in their own right. Cantatas were bundled into yearly cycles, one for every Sunday and feast day in the Lutheran liturgical calendar, and were heard weekly, sometimes several times a week. Bach must have valued them highly; he wrote over 300 cantatas, mostly during his first three years in Leipzig, and invested an extraordinary amount of time and energy in their creation. He integrated ancient and modern elements and the influential text reforms of Lutheran pastor and friend Erdmann Neumeister (1671–1756) into this century-old form, and expanded it almost beyond imagining,[11] all while writing at least one cantata a week during most of the year.

On Sunday, June 11, 1724, one year after he first assumed his duties in Leipzig, Bach initiated his second cycle, one he meant to devote entirely to the chorale cantata, an innovative idea in cyclic construction. Lutheran hymns, or chorales, were one of the great gifts of the Reformation. Chorales were closely linked to the Sunday scripture readings, were useful for teaching, devotional, or inspirational purposes, and were such a vital part of church life that many congregants could sing them from memory.[12] They acted as expressions of faith in the heart language of the people, and injected extraordinary energy into the music of the Lutheran church.[13] Chorales had appeared haphazardly in cantatas for decades prior to Bach, but he fused them in a new and purposeful way. His chorale cantatas employ the stanzas and usually the melody of a single chorale. The first and last strophes of the hymn text appear verbatim in the outermost movements, while the inner strophes are paraphrased in poetic madrigal style in the intervening movements. Musically, the first

movement is nearly always a substantial chorale fantasia, the last movement consists of a simple four-part arrangement of the chorale, and the inner numbers are made up of freely conceived recitatives and arias, sometimes with another hymn-based choral movement as the centerpiece. No one knows why Bach inaugurated a chorale cantata cycle, nor why he suddenly stopped writing chorale cantatas before the second cycle was complete. The last one appeared on March 25, 1725, the final Sunday before Easter. After that, he returned to the style of cantata he had used in his first cycle. It has been speculated that his librettist may have moved or died, or that the pastor changed his sermon series.[14] In any case, in subsequent years he composed a few chorale cantatas to fill the gaps in the cycle, but he never completed the task.

The Trinity Season

The liturgical year was of utmost importance in Bach's cantatas, for it influenced his choice of texts and hymns, and shaped his cyclic construction.[15] The calendar is divided into four seasons, beginning with Advent through Epiphany, then Lent and Easter, Pentecost through Trinity Sunday, and closing with the Trinity season, which occupies fully half of the church year, from late spring through fall. Unlike the other seasons, which focus on Christ's earthly life, it concentrates on issues relevant to the life of the church.[16] Early-season topics center on doctrines, such as crossbearing or resisting temptation, and in mid-season shift to antitheses of faith: judgment versus mercy, faith versus doubt, worldliness versus eternal values. In the autumn the final weeks look to the Last Judgment and Christ's second coming, which then, in an ever-renewing circle, merge into the Advent remembrance of Christ's first coming. These themes strongly colored the Trinity-season chorale cantatas, and affected the ways in which Bach approached his concealed allegorical construction. For even as he addressed the devotional needs of each Sunday and feast day, he seems to have reached for something monumental: an extended series of individual cantatas, each complete in itself, and at the same time aligned with its neighbors into six metaphorical sequences, grouped under the unifying banner of the chorale cantata form. (Table 1) The tools that shape them are so rich and varied that space allows for only a cursory examination of but a few of the many linkages. But even a limited glance opens fascinating vistas into Bach's creative processes.

The Opening Sequences: Overture and Act I

Bach was apparently well aware that his concept broke new ground, for he inaugurated the cycle with a dramatic flourish, and

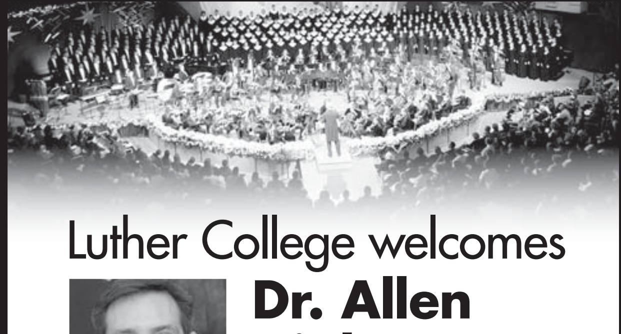

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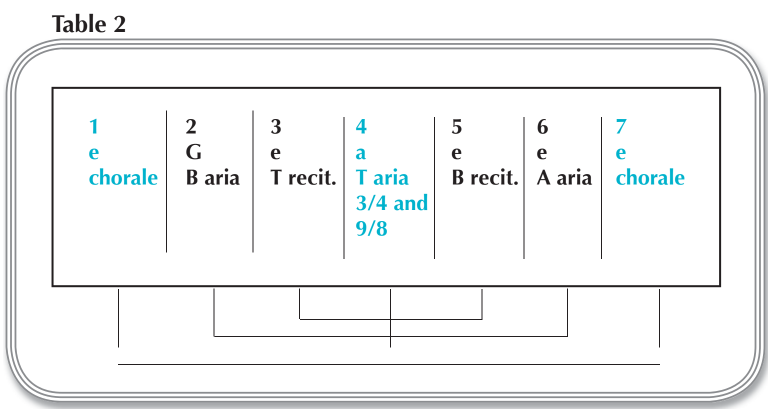
Table 1

Sequence					
1st Sequence	1st Sunday June 11 BWV 20 Danger-hell! F French overture Melody in soprano	2nd Sunday June 18 BWV 2 Danger-heresy! d Motet Melody in alto	St. John's Day Saturday, June 24 BWV 7 Baptism into Christ e (Phrygian) Violin concerto Melody in tenor *Chiastic form* 4th movement number symbolism Shared bass melody ↔	3rd Sunday June 25 BWV 135 Penitential a/e Fantasia Melody in bass Final mvmt doxology Shared bass melody	
2nd Sequence	4th Sunday July 2 BWV 10 Praise for salvation g Chant-based chorale Magnificat *Chiastic form* 5th mvmt - A/T duet Chorale in trumpet Final mvmt doxology	5th Sunday July 9 BWV 93 Trust God c *Chiastic form* 4th mvmt - S/A duet Chorale in strings	6th Sunday July 16 ?	7th Sunday July 23 BWV 113 Penitential g Per omnes versus Final mvmt doxology	
3rd Sequence	8th Sunday July 30 BWV 178 Faith vs. rationalism a 7 mvmts Chorale presence in inner mvmts	9th Sunday Aug 6 BWV 94 Faith vs. worldliness D 8 mvmts Chorale presence in inner mvmts	10th Sunday Aug 13 BWV 101 Judgment d 7 mvmts Chorale presence in inner mvmts *Chiastic form*	11th Sunday Aug 20 BWV 130 Penitential b 8 mvmts Chorale presence in inner mvmts	
4th Sequence 12th Sunday Aug 27 ?	13th Sunday Sep 3 BWV 33 Penitential a 14th Sunday hymn 3rd mvmt - A aria, step motive 5th mvmt - T/B duet	14th Sunday Sep 10 BWV 78 g 1st mvmt Passacaglia, number symbolism *Chiastic form* 2nd mvmt S/A duet, step motive	15th Sunday Sep 17 BWV 99 G 1st mvmt transformed ostinato 5th mvmt S/A duet, step motive	16th Sunday Sep 24 BWV 8 E Liturgical shift: death & resurrection	Michaelmas Friday, Sep 29 BWV 130 C Festive 4th mvmt S/T duet, Final mvmt - 2 stanzas
5th Sequence	17th Sunday Oct 1 BWV 114 Penitential g *Chiastic form* Water images 4th mvmt hymn quote	18th Sunday Oct 8 BWV 96 Joyful F Light images 2nd mvmt hymn quote	19th Sunday Oct 15 BWV 5 Penitential g *Chiastic form* Water images 4th mvmt hymn quote	20th Sunday Oct 22 BWV 180 Joyful F Eucharist Water and Light images 3rd mvmt hymn quote	
6th Sequence	21st Sunday Oct 29 BWV 38 e Descent/ascent pattern 4th mvmt hymn tune 5th mvmt trio	22nd Sunday Nov 5 BWV 115 G Ascent/descent pattern 4th mvmt hymn text	23rd Sunday Nov 12 BWV 139 E Descent/ascent pattern 4th mvmt hymn text	24th Sunday Nov 19 BWV 26 a Ascent/descent pattern	25th Sunday Nov 26 BWV 116 A Ascent/descent pattern 3rd mvmt hymn tune 4th mvmt trio

Table 2



1 e chorale	2 G B aria	3 e T recit.	4 a T aria 3/4 and 9/8	5 e B recit.	6 e A aria	7 e chorale

then applied several metaphorical patterns to shape his first four cantatas into a cautionary but hopeful allegory. As if consciously drawing the curtain on act one, Cantata 20, *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort,* begins with the favored theatrical opener of the day, a French overture. Then an extraordinarily diverse array of styles unfolds across the first movements of the next three cantatas: an archaic polyphonic motet for Cantata 2, *Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein,* a virtuoso duo-violin concerto for Cantata 7, *Christ unser Herr zum Jordan Kam,* and a contemporary chorale fantasia for *Ach Herr, mich armen Sünder,* Cantata 135 (Table 1). Antitheses within unified design were an important tool in the allegorical palette, and often conveyed conflict in matters of faith.[17]

This panorama of forms calls attention to the struggle toward belief portrayed in the texts: 20/1 depicts the perils of hell, 2/1 bemoans the dangers of heresy, 7/1 presents salvation through Christ's sacrificial death, and 135/1 embraces penitential faith. Bach then stamps these same movements with an unprecedented treatment of the hymn tunes[18] The melody appears as usual in the soprano in 20/1, but then it drops to the alto in 2/1, to the tenor in 7/1, and to the bass in 135/1, an unheard of descent pattern that not only further binds the group, but may also musically mimic a gesture of surrender. Tonality comes into play as well; the two "danger" cantatas, 20 and 2, share a relative major/minor key relationship, F major and D minor, while the two "faith" cantatas, 7 and 135, share a tonic/dominant key relationship, E minor and A minor (with a strong E emphasis).[19] Against this backdrop, Bach spotlights Cantata 7 by crafting the seven-movement work into a chiasm, a symmetrical form balanced horizontally on either side of an axis movement (Table 2). Its central fourth movement is surrounded by recitatives, which are in turn surrounded by arias, which are in turn enclosed by chorale settings, all in E minor or the relative major, G.

The A minor fourth movement cuts through these outspread arms like the center post of the cross. Why this cross-like image? Cantata 7 was composed for the feast day of St. John the Baptist, but Bach ignored John's life and instead used John's mission,[20] the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, as a springboard into the heart of his message, Christ's saving death on the cross. He then further weights the central aria by employing a double metrical notation, 3/4 and 9/8, the only such occurrence in the Trinity season cantatas. He thus may well represent two theological principles: the Trinity in the triple meters, and the Incarnation in the united operation of the two meters. The last two measures of Cantata 7 contain the most artful touch of all. Christ's blood heals the wrongs that we have committed, the text declares, and above this corporate admission of sin Bach placed the bass line mentioned in the introduction to this article (Figure 1).[21] Although altered, it is recognizably akin to the hymn melody that opens Cantata 135 (Figure 2). And the words that accompany this phrase, likewise sung by the basses, declare, "Ah Lord, I am a poor sinner," thereby bringing the corporate confession down to an unmistakably personal level. Bach clearly cultivates the thread of thought from the previous day, made possible by the serendipitous convergence of dates between the two cantatas; St. John's Day occurred on Saturday that year, placing their performances within twenty-four hours of one another. Faith then triumphs, penitence is lovingly accepted, the devil is rendered powerless, and Cantata 135 ends with a doxology of praise to the God who provides salvation for all, a suitable denouement for the entire sequence.

The second group, which spans the fourth through the seventh Sundays, presents an analytical problem. Bach was out of town for the sixth Sunday and did not

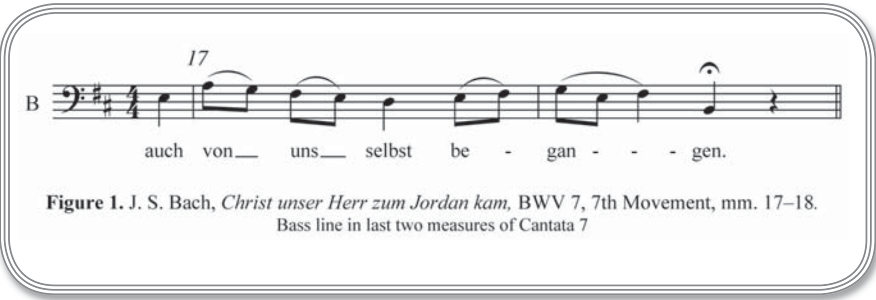


Figure 1. J. S. Bach, *Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam,* BWV 7, 7th Movement, mm. 17–18.
Bass line in last two measures of Cantata 7

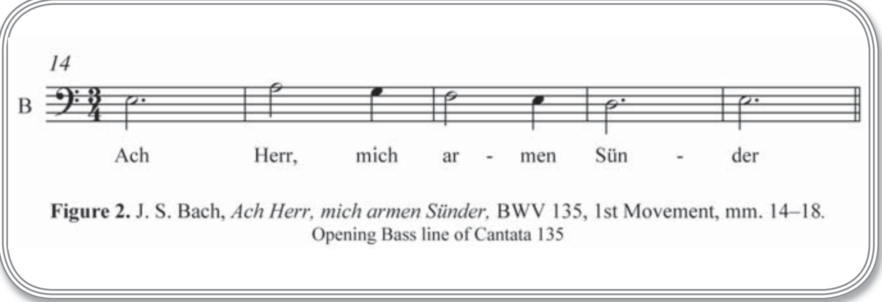


Figure 2. J. S. Bach, *Ach Herr, mich armen Sünder,* BWV 135, 1st Movement, mm. 14–18.
Opening Bass line of Cantata 135

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Leipzig with the Thomaskirche steeple

compose a cantata for that day,[22] thus the narrative stream for the group is obscured. Nevertheless, several characteristics set it apart from the first sequence (Table 1). Most intriguing are the two cantatas that enclose the series, for both employ a single distinctive feature that makes them unique in the Trinity season.[23] Cantata 10, *Meine Seel erhebt den Herren,* for the fourth Sunday, uses a hymn unlike any of the others, one that grew out of a Catholic chant. Its text comes from Luke 1:46–56, the Magnificat; it survived the Reformation, with an appended doxology, as part of the Lutheran Vespers service, and was given a four-part harmonization by Johann Hermann Schein in 1627. *Was willst du dich betrüben,* BWV 107, for the seventh Sunday, uses a libretto unlike any of the others, a verbatim quotation of the entire hymn with no paraphrasing, related to the old-fashioned *per omnes versus* form. Both are also addressed to *meine Seele,* "my soul," a designation not often heard in the Trinity season libretti. Next to Cantata 10 lies Cantata 93, *Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten,* for the fifth Sunday, and compelling connections exist between them. Both are symmetrical in structure, and it is rare to find two such next to one another. Both also employ their respective hymn tunes in an inner movement duet in a patently similar fashion. In 10/5, the chorale sounds in the trumpet while the alto and tenor sing in counterpoint of God's ready help, and in 93/4 the chorale sounds in the strings while soprano and alto sing in counterpoint of God's ready help. Furthermore, both the cantatas and the duets share a tonic/dominant key relationship, G minor and C minor respectively. In spite of the missing cantata, a flow is traceable: Cantata 10's heartfelt joy in salvation moves easily into Cantata 93's recognition of God's care in tribulation, which melds with the acknowledgement in Cantata 107 that God's will is best. As was often his practice, Bach ended the series with something unusual, a 6/8, final-movement doxology, with brief instrumental interludes interspersed throughout, that, in tandem with Cantata 10's closing doxology, pours out bottomless gratitude to the Trinity for its unending love and care.

In his third metaphorical group, for the eighth through the eleventh Sundays, Bach expanded some of the practices he established in the first two sequences even as he explored an interlocking design (Table 1). An alternating grid of tonal relationships and numbers of movements supports a message of conflict and resolution that may have been driven, in part, by Leipzig practice. The tenth Sunday was traditionally devoted to warnings concerning God's wrath toward those who reject Him, and a penitential hymn written in a devastating plague year was closely associated with the day.[24] Bach chose that hymn as the basis for his tenth-Sunday cantata and shaped his sequence around it. The series as a whole moves progressively from threats to faith to God's impending judgment to repentance, while the most conspicuous allegorical tools are the alternating pattern of numbers of movements—7, 8, 7, 8—and the central role of the key of D. The two seven-movement cantatas, *Wo Gott der Herr nicht*

bei uns hält, BWV 178 and *Nimm von uns, Herr, du treuer Gott,* BWV 101, exhibit the fires of judgment, while the two eight-movement cantatas, *Was frag ich nach der Welt,* BWV 94 and *Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut,* BWV 113, seek the Savior in penitence and joy; each pairing is further strengthened through their close tonal relationships. At the same time, the two central works, 94 and 101, use D major/minor to connect the two main theological ideas: it is better to choose Jesus (Cantata 94), for His death protects against God's deserved judgment (Cantata 101). The group is further tied together by Bach's singular treatment of the chorale tunes in the inner movements. They appear more often in this sequence than in any other, and always strikingly interlaced with recitative in various ways. Finally, the chiastic form of Cantata 101, for the tenth Sunday, marks the center of gravity. Its cross-like symmetry acts as the hidden counterweight to the work's external theme, that all deserve God's wrath, and symbolizes the promise that surfaces throughout, via carefully selected chorale quotations, that Jesus' bitter death is the ransom for the world. Then, as in the first sequence, the last cantata opens with a very personal confession of sin and ends with the joy of a forgiven soul, washed clean, lovingly accepted by God, and free from all fear of wrath.

Central Sequence: Act II

Since the Trinity season was long, Bach may have sought to give shape, a sense of climax, to his monumental structure. The fourth group, which stretches across the middle of the season, may well have presented him with such an opportunity. Like the second sequence, it presents an analytical challenge, for the cantata for the twelfth Sunday, the first of the series, is missing (Table 1). Nonetheless, several allegorical tools define it as a unit. For example, vividly pictorial walking-bass motives figure in movements in three adjacent cantatas, 33/3, 78/2, and 99/5; all three present the believer in various attitudes of an often stumbling but ultimately unswerving pursuit of faith. And a string of duets suddenly appears in a season that has seen few of them: 33/5, 78/2, 99/5, and 130/4. All occupy metaphorically significant moments, such as the peaks or troughs of multi-movement tonal ascents or descents, for example. But most intriguing of all is the confluence of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth Sundays, which may have provided Bach with the climactic silhouette he desired, because each of them represents an important allegorical or liturgical signpost. The number 14 was a signature number that Bach sometimes tucked into his compositions at vital theological moments, as if signing his name.[25] The fourteenth Sunday may well be such a moment, for Cantata 78, *Jesu, der du meine Seele,* is a towering work that embraces the Passion of Christ in intensely contrite and personal terms. And Bach may have made a very deliberate hymn choice in preparation for this Sunday,

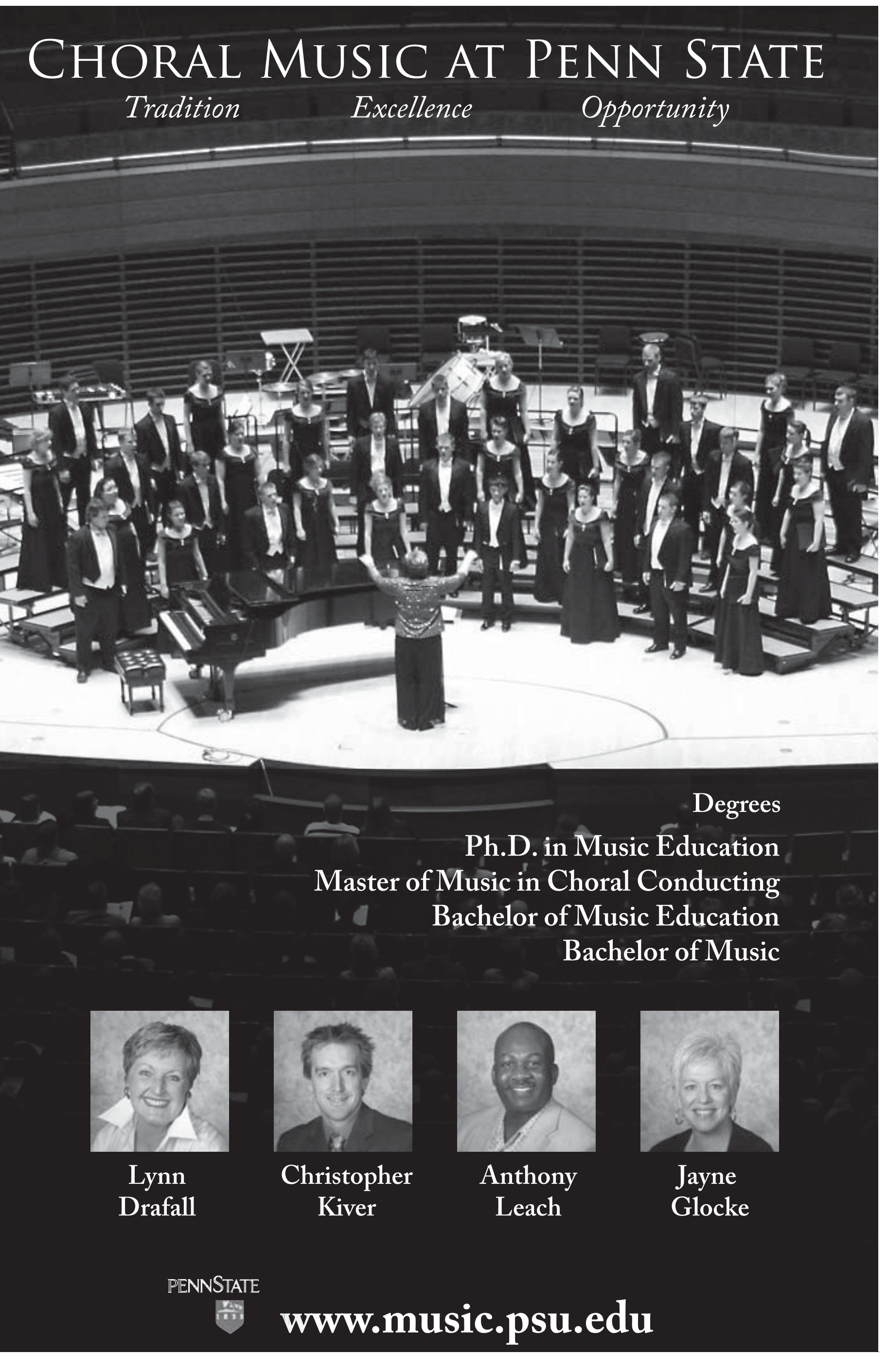

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Figure 3. J. S. Bach, *Jesu, der du meine Seele,* BWV 78, 1st Movement, mm. 1–4.
lamento-bass *ostinato*

Table 3

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
g	B flat	c	g	E flat	c	g
Chorale passacaglia Number symbolism	S/A aria Step motive	T recit	T aria	B recit	B aria	Chorale
Saved by Jesus' death	Hasten to Jesus!	Confession, surrender	Guilt cancelled	I give my heart	Conscience quieted	Eternity with Christ

for he shifted a fourteenth-Sunday chorale to the thirteenth Sunday to use as the basis for remorseful Cantata 33, *Allein zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ,* and then chose a profoundly penitential hymn for Cantata 78, one that does not appear in any contemporary list of suitable fourteenth-Sunday chorales.[26] The enormous first–movement passacaglia, set to a fervent statement of faith, contains an extraordinary convergence of national and historical influences: French sarabande rhythm, *stile antico* motet form, Italian concerto-style *ritornellos,* and Lutheran chorale, all governed by a nearly relentless *lamento*-bass *ostinato* whose drooping chromaticism exemplifies Christ's sufferings (Figure 3).[27]

Numbers appear to play a major role:[28] to name just two examples, the *ostinato* repeats 27 times,[29] a multiple of 3 that figures symbolically in other Bach works, and it disappears 3 times, for a total of 21 bars, at texts that speak of the completion of Christ's redemptive work. The cantata's chiastic structure once again embodies the cross with G minor as tonal pillars, and mirrored forms that flow to and from the joyful release from guilt in the central aria (Table 3). But another thought-provoking association lies in the tonal and thematic relationship between Cantata 78 and the work for the following week, the fifteenth Sunday of the twenty-five in the Trinity season. This Sunday straddles a fascinating mathematical ratio, the golden section, that magical near-two-thirds point (here of the number twenty-five), which often appeared as a climactic apex in Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque arts.[30] The confluence of the fourteenth and fifteenth Sundays may have been irresistible to Bach, for Cantata 78's sorrowful G-minor Passion emphasis bonds tonally with Cantata 99, *Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan,* and its forthright G-major declaration of trust in the God who does all things well. Like Cantata 78 the text is deeply personal, and a cross casts a shadow over the work, but this time it is the daily cross of the believer, tempered by the God who saves His faithful ones. Unlike Cantata 78, the instruments rather than the voices carry the focus in the opening movement, but this serves to spotlight a bass motive which transforms the lament of the previous week into a cheerful major-mode dance (Figure 4).

The two works share a further association through their duets: both are for soprano and alto, and both address the fleshly weakness of the believer over expressive walking-bass step-motives that depict their firm resolve to follow Jesus. Like two sides of the same allegorical coin, these two cantatas may well form a deliberately placed, two-part declaration of faith.

In sheer size, scope and weight there is no other work in the season quite like Cantata 78, and its teaming with Cantata 99 marks a vibrant high point in the calendar. The passacaglia form may add yet another emblematic layer, for it often served as the finale to a ballet or opera, especially when combined with a chorus.[31] Perhaps Bach used it to close the curtain on the first two-thirds of the season, for with the sixteenth Sunday the liturgical thrust traditionally turned toward the consideration of death and resurrection in preparation for the imminent Advent season.[32] He introduced the topic with *Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben,* BWV 8, a work that sets the hope of heaven against the fear of death, dressed in a key that seldom appears in the cantatas, E major, one that carries strongly positive associations and usually marks the outer limits of Bach's tonal palette.[33] Motion upward or downward

Figure 4. J. S. Bach, *Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan,* BWV 99, 1st Movement, mm. 46–47.
Transformed *ostinato*

through relative major and minor keys or through increasing or decreasing numbers of sharps or flats was a fundamental allegorical tool.[34] Here Bach leaps upward from the flat realm of Cantata 78 through the one-sharp key of Cantata 99 to soar above fear and straight toward a high-sharp heaven. Just as striking is the manner in which he leaps tonally downward, back to earth in a sense, to C-major Cantata 130, *Herr Gott, dich loben alle wir,* for the following Friday, the feast of the Archangel Michael. This was an important feast day that honored angelic protectors, and its festive tone seems far removed from the sequence. Yet several musical metaphors anchor it in place. Once again a duet occupies a prominent position, the fourth movement, which emphasizes angel assistance. The key of C completes the C-major triad outlined by the keys of Cantatas 99 and 8, and thus links the three works in a triptych that addresses the rewards of faith. Finally, the unusual two-stanza ending movement of Cantata 130 signals the finish of a freewheeling series that moves via allegorical means from lowly penitence to vibrant expressions of faith to the heights of heaven and back to earth again, to shape an unforgettable climax and a new direction for the season.

Ending Sequences: Closing the Circle

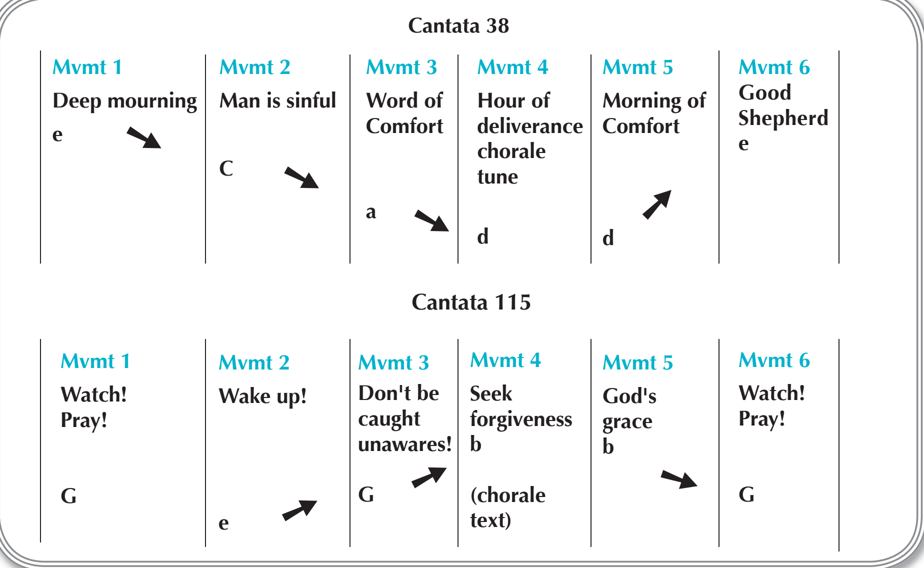
For the seventeenth through the twentieth Sundays Bach moved fully into preparation for Advent, and his fifth sequence abounds in a series of pendulum-like swings that undergird the antitheses so typical of this part of the Trinity season (Table 1). Most noticeable is the oscillation of keys between G-minor and F-major cantatas, which matches their thematic oscillation between penitence and joy. This is buttressed by their structures, which rock between symmetrical and asymmetrical forms. Even orchestral motives participate; while the first-movement motives of the G-minor works are drawn from their respective hymns, the first-movement motives of the F-major works are freely conceived. Water and light images figure strongly in the texts, again in an alternating pattern across the series, until they combine in the culminating work, Cantata 180. But in the midst of this fluctuation a sequential pattern occurs; a single chorale quotation appears in an inner movement of each work, always carefully placed to spotlight its subject.

This multi-layered blueprint forges a metaphorical storyline that zigzags through apparently contrasting ideas on a purposeful drive to the finale on the twentieth Sunday, the day traditionally given over to anticipation of the kingdom of God. It begins with sin as death, likened to the toxic disease of dropsy, or fluid retention, from the day's Gospel account, in *Ach lieben Christen, seid getrost,* BWV 114. The chorale quote in the axis fourth movement paradoxically underlines death as the path to life, and its chiastic form points to the cross as that pathway. In Cantata 96, *Herr Christ, der einge Gottessohn,* Christ shines as the bright morning star, the Incarnate One as the second-movement hymn quote illuminates, since it was His descent to earth that led to His sacrificial death on the cross. Cantata 5, *Wo soll lich fliehen hin,* plunges into a sorrowful contemplation of sin, but the hymn quotation in the fourth movement highlights forgiveness as Christ's cleansing blood, like water, washes away sin and buries it in His grave.

This life-through-death release lies very near the mathematical golden section, for it occurs in the seventeenth movement of the entire twenty-seven-movement group. The forgiven sinner then leaves the dark cave of sin in *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele* BWV 180 and enters the kingdom of light, thirsting for the Eucharist, as the third-movement chorale quote makes plain. Even as the series moves steadily from sin to forgiveness to God's kingdom, one can imagine Bach's congregation moving forward to the Communion table on the twentieth Sunday, rejoicing in the coming kingdom.

With the last five cantatas of the Trinity season, Bach completed the final preparations for the celebration of Christ's first Advent by turning to a deadly serious consideration of Christ's Second Advent. He did so by accentuating the end of time, the transience of life, and the efficacy of repentance. Vocal trios act as bookends for the sequence and the key of E serves as the allegorical center of the group, giving shape and structure to the whole (Table 1). The first two cantatas pair their story lines through related tonalities: deep distress over sin (E-Phrygian *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir,* BWV 38), for judgment day looms near (G-major *Mache dich, mein Geist, bereit,* BWV 115). Both also use a broad tonal ascent or descent to their fourth movements, which address forgiveness, and then emphasize this with a hymn quotation. (Table 4) The last two cantatas pair their story lines through the key of A; life is fleeting (A-minor *Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig,* BWV 26), but God saves from death (A-major *Du Friedefürst,*

Table 4



Cantata 38

Mvmt 1	Mvmt 2	Mvmt 3	Mvmt 4	Mvmt 5	Mvmt 6
Deep mourning e	Man is sinful C	Word of Comfort a	Hour of deliverance chorale tune d	Morning of Comfort d	Good Shepherd e

Cantata 115

Mvmt 1	Mvmt 2	Mvmt 3	Mvmt 4	Mvmt 5	Mvmt 6
Watch! Pray! G	Wake up! e	Don't be caught unawares! G	Seek forgiveness b (chorale text)	God's grace b	Watch! Pray! G

Herr Jesu Christ, BWV 116). Cantata 26, the darkest of the five, has no inner-movement hymn quotation to lighten its almost unrelenting hopelessness, but 116/3 employs the hymn melody to call attention to a plea for mercy. Both also apply tonal ascents, similar to Cantata 115, to mark their climactic fourth movements: death destroys (26/4), but God's love provides salvation (116/4). At the balance point of the series, Cantata 139's high-sharp E major relates to both ends of the sequence, and embraces all through its core message in the fourth movement, preceded by a multi-movement tonal descent and undergirded by a hymn quotation: God is the sinner's friend. Most fascinating are the trios by which Bach frames the sequence. This is their first appearance in the Trinity season, and two of the only three times they are employed in all of the second-cycle chorale cantatas; this alone makes them conspicuous, but there is more. They mark the turning point of multi-movement ascent/descent patterns, and contain two doctrines Bach seldom fails to highlight, the moment of deliverance from sin in 38/5, and the moment of congregational repentance in 116/4.

Their structure is remarkably similar, and built in a way that underscores the numbers 3 and 5: both are set for three voices, employ three motives, and repeat these motives contrapuntally either three or five times in a descending circle of fifths.[35] The Trinitarian significance of the number 3 has been addressed above. In number symbolism, the number 5 can refer to the five wounds of Christ on the cross;[36] it is noteworthy that both movements underline deliverance through the sacrificial death of the Savior. Bach's congregation was now well prepared for Advent: life is short, judgment is coming, but the Friend of sinners has provided a way of escape for the penitent through the death of His Son.

Performance Considerations

As fascinating as these metaphorical narratives are, what are we as conductors to make of them? Are they relevant to modern performance? Some may argue that the hidden allegories are too obscure to be of value. It seems likely, however, that discernment of the unseen activity can aid the ebb and flow, the shifting weights and emphases, of the unfolding story line, and stimulate an imaginative, even an adventurous, performance.

The starting point for interpretational considerations must begin with recognition of the cantata's original function as a servant of theology. A church performance that placed it between the relevant Gospel reading and the sermon, and allowed all three to work together as they were originally meant to do, might recapture that sense of mission,[37] especially if sung in the congregation's native tongue. Original language versus vernacular is an age-old debate, but a vernacular performance is certainly in keeping with the spirit of the cantatas. Infusing the service with the chorale in prelude, postlude, and, in congregational singing, could awaken the listener's ears to its enlightening presence in the work. A sequence of linked cantatas performed on the Sundays for which they were intended could ground the works in the church calendar and bolster the long-range allegory, especially if all texts were made available ahead of time, as Bach did with his congregations. He usually packaged them in bundles of up to six cantatas,[38] which gave the hearers a chance to read all the libretti in advance as preparation for the services. But most of us will experience the cantatas in concert, far removed from their eighteenth-century Lutheran context, with diverse audiences that may be unfamiliar with the musical, theological, even the literal, language of the work. A fertile area for creativity may lie in combining several connected cantatas in one performance along the lines of the *Christmas Oratorio.* The chorus could sing the chorales prior to the cantata presentations, even invite the audience to join in, in order to familiarize them with melody and words. Highlighting the hymn texts in some way in the concert program (or church bulletin, for that matter) could emphasize their structural importance; the same could apply to allegorically significant movements. It would be quite interesting to experiment with some direct theatrical effects. For instance, ascent/descent patterns might be enhanced through synchronous lighting changes, symmetrical forms accentuated through shifts in soloist's positions, allegorically weighted movements underlined via staging or lighting. Our undeniably visually- and entertainment-oriented audiences may well respond to such cues, and with their help rediscover the cantata's artistry and communicative power.

The Question Remains

This all too brief tour through Bach's second-cycle Trinity season chorale cantatas still leads back to the question posed in the introduction; why did Bach create such a complex, multi-layered, monumental meeting point between the seen and the unseen? Certainly his was a strongly Christian culture, one that valued and expected allegorically and rhetorically driven musical expression. And, certainly Bach seems to have had a clear sense of his purpose in life, as evidenced by mottos such as *soli Deo gloria* [to God's glory alone] which he often penned in his scores, and by such memos as "In praise of the Almighty's will and for my neighbor's greater skill" which he jotted on the title page of the *Orgelbüchlein.* He was also an exceptional teacher and avid puzzlemaker, and must have enjoyed lacing his works with buried nuggets to be discovered by his pupils and listeners. Perhaps, however, the most telling clue can be found in the note he scribbled in the margin of his personal Calov Bible, next to II Chronicles 5:12–13, the moment when God's glory filled Solomon's Temple at the height of choral praises: "With a devotional music God is always present with His grace."[39] It would seem that, for Bach, his musical sermons, devotional music of the highest order, became the place

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where the eternal met the here and now, and demanded his utmost skill. They must be perfect in every detail, for Bach's audience lay beyond the confines of the church building; perhaps his true audience was, finally and ultimately, an audience of "one."

NOTES

[1] George Bozarth, private communication.

[2] Robin Leaver, *J. S. Bach as Preacher: His Passions and Music in Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1984), 14.

[3] See Eric Chafe, *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 26, and Hans David and Arthur Mendel, eds., *The New Bach Reader,* revised and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 16–17.

[4] The ideas in this paragraph are condensed from Chafe's, *Analyzing,* xv, 3–11, 23–26, 30–34, *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1991), 8–15, and "Luther's 'Analogy of Faith' in Bach's Church Music," *Dialogue* 24 (spring, 1985):96–101.

[5] Chafe, *Analyzing,* 23–25, 30–31.

[6] For more on number symbolism in antiquity and its possible connections to Bach's music, see John Bertalot, "Number Symbolism in Bach Part I," *Musical Opinion* (August 1981): 413–15; idem, "Spirituality and Symbolism in the Music of J. S. Bach," *Organist's Review* 86 (Part 1 August 2000): 222–25, (Part 2 November 2000): 331–35; Timothy Smith, "J. S. Bach the Symbolist," *Journal of Church Music* 27 (September 1985): 8–13, 46.

[7] See David and Mendel, *New Bach Reader,* 253–254, for a listing of the extensive theological holdings in Bach's library.

[8] Ibid., 16–17.

[9] Chafe, *Analyzing,* 31.

[10] Leaver, "The Liturgical Place and Homiletic Purpose of Bach's Cantatas," *Worship* 59 (1985): 194–95.

[11] David and Mendel, *New Bach Reader,* 14–15. Regarding Neumeister's reforms, see Charles Sanford Terry, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Cantata Texts, Sacred and Secular, with a Reconstruction of the Leipzig Liturgy of His Period* (London: Constable & Co., 1926), 4, and Peter Wollny, "Genres and Styles of Sacred Music Around and After 1700," in *The World of the Bach Cantatas,* ed. Christoph Wolff, vol. 1, *Johann Sebastian Bach's Early Sacred Cantatas* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 26.

[12] Daniel R. Melamed, "Cantata Choruses and Chorales," in *The World of the Bach Cantatas,* vol. I, 162–64.

[13] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach Among the Theologians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 28.

[14] For discussions of the various ideas concerning the librettist, see Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach: With Their Librettos in German-English Parallel Text,* rev. and trans. by Richard D.P. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32–33, Günther Stiller, *J. S. Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig,* ed. Robin Leaver, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman, Daniel F. Poellot, and Hilton C. Oswald, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1984), 218–20, and Hans-Joachim Schulze, "Texts und Textdichter, in *Die Welt der Bach-Kantaten*," ed. Christoph Wolff, vol. 3 (Stuttgart, 1999), 116. Cantata texts in Bach's time were usually written by clergymen, although it is possible that Bach himself created them.

[15] See Chafe, *Analyzing,* 11–12, and Pelikan, *Theologians,* 3, 10–11.

[16] Chafe, *Analyzing,* 12, for this and the following.

[17] Chafe, *Tonal Allegory,* 4–5, 24–25.

[18] Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach: With Their Librettos in German-English Parallel Text,* rev. and trans. by Richard D. P. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 390, 404, 414, 686. Dürr may have been the first to spot these two prominent patterns.

[19] Bach obscures A minor and emphasizes E throughout the first movement, in the first measure, at many cadence points, and even at the final cadence. He does so in the last movement as well, although A minor is more apparent there. Interestingly, Dürr indentifies the cantata as E minor; see Cantatas, p. 412.

[20] Ibid., 686.

[21] Cantata 7's E-Phrygian chorale tune uses a raised sixth. Bach places the C♯ in the key signature of the last movement, hence the two-sharp signature.

[22] Ibid., 438.

[23] Ibid., 678 and 446.

[24] Ibid., 483. See also Leaver, "Bach, Hymns, and Hymnbooks," *The Hymn* 36, no. 4 (October 1985): 7.

[25] In the natural order alphabet, A=1, B=2, etc. Thus, BACH=14.

[26] Ulrich Leisinger, forward to *BWV 33, Allein zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ,* trans. John Coombs, (Leipzig: Carus ed. 31.033, 2003), 2, and Anne Leahy, "The Opening Chorus of Cantata BWV 78, *Jesu, der du meine Seele;* Another Example of Bach's Interest in Matter Soteriological," *BACH: The Quarterly Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute* 30 (Spring-Summer 1999):29.

[27] Robert L. Marshall, *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach: The Sources, The Style, The Significance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989), 76–79.

[28] Bach's use of numbers is a controversial topic. For varying views, see Ruth Tatlow, *Bach and the Riddle of the Number Alphabet,* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Marshall, *The Music of Bach,* 10, Pelikan, *Theologians,* 32-34, and Leaver, "Number Associations in the Structure of Bach's Credo, *BWV 232" BACH: The Quarterly Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute,* vol. 7, no. 3 (July 1976): 17–24.

[29] Dürr, *Cantatas,* 526. Dürr does not give his bar count, but see also Leahy, "Cantata BWV 78," 33, for her count of the bars, and my dissertation, "The Seen and the Unseen: Hidden Allegorical Links in the Trinity Season Chorale Cantatas of J. S. Bach" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2008), 70n, for a slightly different bar count.

[30] To find the golden section, multiply a number by .618.

[31] Klaus Hoffmann, from the liner notes for *BWV 78, 99, 114,* trans. by Andrew Barnett and William Jewson, Bach Collegium Japan, CD 1361, 6.

[32] Chafe, *Analyzing,* 14.

[33] Chafe, *Allegory,* 152n, 153.

[34] Chafe, *Analyzing,* 28–32.

[35] Chafe, *Allegory,* 198 and 219–20. See also Gingrich, "The Seen and the Unseen," for a more detailed description of the circle-of-fifths descents.

[36] Robin A. Leaver, "Number Associations," 20.

[37] See Dürr, *Cantatas,* for the relevant Gospel readings of all the cantatas.

[38] Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2000), 259.

[39] David and Mendel, *New Bach Reader,* 161.