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## Bach And God

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## Chapter 1

# On the Musically Theological in Bach's Cantatas

From informal Internet discussion groups to specialized academic conferences and publications, an ongoing debate has raged on whether J. S. Bach ought to be considered a purely artistic or also a religious figure.<sup>1</sup> A recently formed but now disbanded group of scholars, the *Internationale Arbeitsgemeinschaft für theologische Bachforschung*, made up mostly of German theologians, has made significant contributions toward understanding the religious contexts of Bach's liturgical music.<sup>2</sup> These writers have not entirely captured the attention or respect of the wider world of Bach

1. For the academic side, the most influential has been Friedrich Blume, "Umriss eines neuen Bach-Bildes," *Musica* 16 (1962): 169–176, translated as "Outlines of a New Picture of Bach," *Music and Letters* 44 (1963): 214–227. The most important responses include Alfred Dürr, "Zum Wandel des Bach-Bildes: Zu Friedrich Blumes Mainzer Vortrag," *Musik und Kirche* 32 (1962): 145–152; see also Friedrich Blume, "Antwort von Friedrich Blume," *Musik und Kirche* 32 (1962): 153–156; Friedrich Smend, "Was bleibt? Zu Friedrich Blumes Bach-Bild," *Der Kirchenmusiker* 13 (1962): 178–188; and Gerhard Herz, "Toward a New Image of Bach," *Bach* 1, no. 4 (1970): 9–27, and *Bach* 2, no. 1 (1971): 7–28 (reprinted in *Essays on J. S. Bach* [Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985], 149–184).

2. For a convenient list of the group's main publications, see Daniel R. Melamed and Michael Marissen, *An Introduction to Bach Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15. For a full bibliography to 1996, see Renate Steiger, ed., *Theologische Bachforschung heute: Dokumentation und Bibliographie der Internationalen Arbeitsgemeinschaft für theologische Bachforschung 1976–1996* (Glienicke and Berlin: Galda and Walch, 1998), 353–445.

scholarship, however, probably at least in part because, with a few exceptions,<sup>3</sup> their work has focused much more on Bach's librettos than on his musical settings of them.<sup>4</sup> Although Canadian musicologist Eric Chafe published a major study that does integrate extensive theological and musical analysis of Bach's liturgical vocal works,<sup>5</sup> advocates of so-called purely aesthetic contemplation have often continued to be quick to criticize any form of theological Bach research. They argue that Bach's role consisted only in giving musical expression to assigned texts;<sup>6</sup> and since it is Bach's first-rate musical settings, not his artistically second-rate cantata librettos, that typically excite modern interest, the verbal content of his vocal works, theological or otherwise, becomes of no real import. Arguments against an exclusively aesthetic approach have occasionally been advanced by appealing to the explanatory power of

3. These exceptions include, for example, Meinrad Walter, *Musik—Sprache des Glaubens: Studien zum geistlichen Vokalwerk Johann Sebastian Bachs* (Frankfurt: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1994); and Renate Steiger, "Methode und Ziel einer musikalischen Hermeneutik im Werke Bachs," *Musik und Kirche* 47 (1977): 209–224.

4. For an example of a remarkably insightful study of Bach's librettos that does not engage his musical settings, see Elke Axmacher, "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben": *Untersuchungen zum Wandel des Passionsverständnisses im frühen 18. Jahrhundert* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler-Verlag, 1984).

5. Eric Chafe, *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991). For a simpler approach that remains sensitive to theological concerns, see Alfred Dürr, *Die Kantaten von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Munich and Kassel: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag and Bärenreiter, 1985); translated and revised by Richard D. P. Jones as *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach: With Their Librettos in German-English Parallel Text* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

6. See, for example, David Schulenberg, "'Musical Allegory' Reconsidered: Representation and Imagination in the Baroque," *Journal of Musicology* 12 (1995), 203–239; see also Paul Brainard, "Bach as Theologian?" in *Reflections on the Sacred: A Musicological Perspective*, edited by Paul Brainard (New Haven: Yale Institute of Sacred Music, 1994), 1–7; and Joyce L. Irwin, "Johann Sebastian Bach: A Musician, Not a Theologian," in *Neither Voice nor Heart Alone: German Lutheran Theology of Music in the Age of the Baroque* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 141–152.

Lutheran theology for interpreting Bach's secular instrumental music (that is, a repertory in which it is not a matter of text setting).<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, I would like to put forward the notion that Bach's musical settings of church cantata poetry can project theological meanings that are purposefully different from those arrived at by simply reading his librettos.

In so picturing Bach as a sort of musical-religious interpreter, my goal is only to gain a deeper understanding of Bach's compositions. The biographical question of whether Bach himself sincerely held whatever religious views might be projected in his works is a related but somewhat different matter, and it will not be pursued here. My method will deliberately be more suggestive than exhaustive. Rather than seeking a full-blown, unified theory of the theological aspects of Bach's music, I will illustrate a few ways in which theology and composition might be read as interacting, mutually productive forces.

Theological approaches admittedly run the risk of leaving some readers with the feeling that virtually anything could be "demonstrated." For interdisciplinary work, one might prefer philosophy to theology. John Butt, for example, has declared that "God who was central to Bach's life as an active and devout Lutheran is not always the same as the God of his compositional mind. . . . Bach's compositional mind can be illuminated—if it cannot directly be explained—by analogy with the metaphysics of rationalist philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."<sup>8</sup> I fear that

7. See Michael Marissen, *The Social and Religious Designs of J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Michael Marissen, "The Theological Character of J. S. Bach's *Musical Offering*," in *Bach-Studies 2*, edited by Daniel R. Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 85–106 (reprinted as chapter 7 in this book).

8. John Butt, "Bach's Metaphysics of Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, edited by John Butt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 47; see also, in the same volume, John Butt, "'A Mind Unconscious That It Is Calculating?' Bach and the Rationalist Philosophy of Wolff, Leibniz and Spinoza," 60–71. (Butt himself is, however, by no means unsympathetic to theological concerns.)

philosophical approaches to Bach, while intellectually appealing, may involve too many problems of contextual plausibility. Does Bach's thought actually coincide with that of Spinoza and Leibniz? I wonder if the issue is analogous to what Albert Schweitzer had to say about scholars who try to explain the apostle Paul's very Jewish thought primarily on the basis of Hellenism: they are, he says, "like a man who should bring water from a long distance in leaky watering-cans in order to water a garden lying beside a stream."<sup>9</sup>

In any event, there can hardly be any doubt that Bach was familiar with the basic tenets of Lutheran theology. Before he could assume his post as cantor in Leipzig, he had to be tested on his knowledge of Lutheranism as it is systematized in the *Book of Concord* (1580).<sup>10</sup> It is also important to know that Bach owned a large collection of Bible commentaries and sermons,<sup>11</sup> including several sets of Luther's collected German works and the Calov

The question here is one of emphasis.) See also Jeremy Begbie, "Disquieting Conversations: Bach, Modernity, and God," in *Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 41–72.

9. Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Seabury, 1968; German orig. 1930), 140; quoted in N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 2, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 213. That first-century Judaism was more permeated by Hellenism than earlier scholars cared to allow, however, is shown by Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, translated by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).

10. Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze, eds., *Bach-Dokumente II* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1969), no. 134; translation in Christoph Wolff, ed., *The New Bach Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 105. Reference to Bach's knowledge of the "Formula of Concord" (1577, printed in the *Book of Concord*) is found in *Bach-Dokumente II*, no. 136 (not reproduced in *New Bach Reader*), and his knowledge of the "Saxon Visitation Articles" (1592–1593; printed in subsequent editions of the *Book of Concord*) is found in Hans-Joachim Schulze, ed., *Bach-Dokumente III* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1972), no. 92a (not in *New Bach Reader*). For a full discussion of the (nontrivial) nature of these theological examinations, see Martin Petzoldt, "Bachs Prüfung vor dem Kurfürstlichen Konsistorium zu Leipzig," *Bach-Jahrbuch* 84 (1998): 19–30.

11. Robin A. Leaver, *Bachs Theologische Bibliothek/Bach's Theological Library* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler-Verlag, 1985). For further comments and

Bible Commentary.<sup>12</sup> Bach's copy of the Calov Bible is now kept at the Concordia Seminary Library in St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>13</sup> Scientific research has determined that the chemical content of the inks in the extensive underlinings in this Bible is the same as that of the many marginal comments whose handwriting characteristics were identified with Bach's by Hans-Joachim Schulze of the Bach-Archiv, Leipzig.<sup>14</sup>

To our examples, then.

### The Pastoral and *Meine Seufzer, meine Tränen* (BWV 13)

Grim indeed are the sentiments expressed in the opening aria from Bach's church cantata *Meine Seufzer, meine Tränen* (BWV 13):

Meine Seufzer, meine Tränen	My sighs, my tears
Können nicht zu zählen sein.	are not able to be counted.
Wenn sich täglich Wehmut	When melancholy is encoun-
findet	tered daily
Und der Jammer <sup>15</sup> nicht	and my misery does not fade
verschwindet,	away,

some minor revisions, see Johannes Wallman, "Johann Sebastian Bach und die 'Geistlichen Bücher' seiner Bibliothek," *Pietismus und Neuzeit* 12 (1986): 162-181.

12. Abraham Calov, *Die heilige Bibel nach S. Herrn D. Martini Lutheri Deutscher Dolmetschung und Erklärung* (Wittenberg, 1681-1682).

13. For facsimiles of the pages with Bach's notations, see Howard H. Cox, ed., *The Calov Bible of J. S. Bach* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 108-393. See also Robin A. Leaver, *J. S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985).

14. Bruce Kusko, "Proton Milloprobe Analysis of the Hand-Penned Annotations in Bach's Calov Bible," in Cox, *Calov Bible*, 31-106.

15. In Bach's own score and separate vocal part, the words *Schmerz noch* ("agony still") replace the librettist's *Jammer* only at bar 42; see Marianne Helms, *Kritischer Bericht* for Johann Sebastian Bach, *Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*,

Ach! so muß uns diese Pein	ah! then this pain must
Schon <sup>16</sup> den Weg zum Tode	surely set before us the way of
bahnen.	death. <sup>17</sup>

Bach's setting, with its minor mode and pervasive chromaticisms and with its resolute sixteenth-note activity in the oboe part, captures the anxious mood of Georg Christian Lehms's libretto extremely well.

Yet Bach's aria does not wallow in misery. The otherworldly instrumental sonority (two recorders and oboe da caccia<sup>18</sup>) and the instrumental counterpoint (parallel thirds or sixths in duple meter with a triple subdivision of the beat) evoke the Arcadian comfort of the pastoral. The normal way to project the world of the pastoral is, of course, not via the minor mode with chromatic inflections but via the major mode with diatonic harmonies. See, for example, the evocation of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in the aria "Beglückte Herde, Jesu Schafe" from his church cantata *Du Hirte Israel, höre* (BWV 104).<sup>19</sup> In Cantata 13, while Bach's tonality and harmonies express powerfully the surface pessimism of Lehms's poetry, the scoring and counterpoint offer a shepherdly comfort not even hinted at in the aria text, providing an example of what Luther

series I, vol. 5, *Kantaten zum Epiphaniastag bis zum 2. Sonntag nach Epiphaniastag* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1976), 215.

16. In Bach's own score and separate vocal part, the word *nur* ("only") replaces the librettist's *schon* only at bar 46; see Helms, *Kritischer Bericht*, 215.

17. See also Jeremiah 21:8.

18. The first and arguably still the interpretively best recording of Cantata 13 on period instruments, the one directed by Gustav Leonhardt in vol. 4 of Bach's complete church cantatas for Telefunken/Teldec, though listed that way, does not actually feature the oboe da caccia. The true identity of this extraordinary instrument was not discovered until Nikolaus Harnoncourt recorded *Wer weiß, wie nahe mir mein Ende!* (BWV 27) for vol. 7 of the series.

19. For a comprehensive study of Bach and the pastoral, see Renate Steiger, "Die Welt ist euch ein Himmelreich: Zu J. S. Bachs Deutung des Pastoralen," *Musik und Kirche* 41 (1971): 1-8, 69-79.

would call God's Yes behind his No.<sup>20</sup> It is only later in the cantata, at the soprano recitative, that comfort is made verbally explicit:

Mein Kummer nimmet zu	My affliction gets worse
Und raubt mir alle Ruh,	and robs me of all peace.
Mein Jammerkrug ist ganz	My jar of misery is
Mit Tränen angefüllet.	filled to the brim with tears.
...	...
Doch, Seele, nein,	Yet, soul, no,
Sei nur getrost in deiner Pein:	be only hopeful in your pain:
Gott kann den Wermutsaft	Your wormwood sap God can
Gar leicht in Freudenwein	rather easily change into wine
verkehren	of joy,
Und dir alsdenn viel tausend	and then grant you many
Lust gewähren.	thousand delights.

Lehms's libretto appears to be punning on *weinen* and *Wein*, the initial "tears" wine being transformed into "joy wine" at the end of the recitative. Inspiration for this may have come in part from the gospel reading for the Sunday to which Lehms assigned his poetry<sup>21</sup> (the second after Epiphany), John 2:1–11, the story of Jesus transforming water into wine at a wedding in Cana.<sup>22</sup>

Bach's subtle interpretive strategy of musically though not verbally having projected comfort already in the opening aria agrees to some extent with the commentary on Romans 12:15 in the Olearius Bible Commentary from his personal library (Romans 12:6–16 being the epistle reading for the Second Sunday after

20. See the similar comments on the aria "Ach, mein Sinn" from Bach's *St. John Passion* in Michael Marissen, *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St. John Passion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 17.

21. Georg Christian Lehms, *Gottgefälliges Kirchen-Opffer* (Darmstadt, 1711), 17–18.

22. See also Steiger, "Die Welt ist euch ein Himmelreich," 76. Such sentiments are clearly expressed in Bach's church cantata *Ich hatte viel bekümmernis* (BWV 21/10): "Verwandle dich, *Weinen*, in lauterem *Wein*! / Es wird nur mein *Achzen* in *Jauchzen* mir sein" (my emphasis: "Transform yourself, weeping/whining, into pure wine! / My moaning will now become singing to me").



Epiphany): “Weeps . . . NB. Weeping is a routine of reasonable souls, whereby sadness is displayed. Thence it is also the case that the tears of those who weep are various. For it may even happen that one by chance can shed tears of joy (like Jacob in Genesis 29:11, and Joseph in Genesis 43:30 and 46:29), in that one at the same time considers evil and good; and in that one is glad about the present good and at the same time ponders the former, overcome misfortune.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Justification by Faith and *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her* (BWV 9)**

On the face of it, the following text from Bach’s church cantata *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her* (BWV 9)—wanting in poetic inspiration, teeming in theological doctrine—hardly seems to cry out for music:

Herr, du siehst statt	Lord, you look, rather than at
guter Werke	good works,
Auf des Herzens	at the heart’s strength
Glaubensstärke,	of faith;
Nur den Glauben nimmst du an.	you accept only faith.
Nur der Glaube macht gerecht,	Only faith renders [us] just,
Alles andre scheint zu	all else shines forth <sup>24</sup> too
schlecht,	poorly
Als daß es uns helfen kann.	to be able to help us.

Bach managed, however, to turn out a musical setting of phenomenal beauty, outdoing himself in generating line after line

23. Johann Olearius, *Biblische Erklärung, Darinnen, nechst dem allgemeinen Haupt-Schlüssel der gantzen heiligen Schrift* (Leipzig, 1678–1681), 5:1118.

24. See also Wisdom of Solomon 3:7 and Matthew 13:43.

of beguiling melody. All the more astounding is the fact that his instrumental pair largely proceeds in canon at the fifth while his vocal pair is also canonic, proceeding likewise at the fifth.

As if the challenges of writing in double canon here and there in the A section of this da capo aria were not formidable enough, Bach in the B section occasionally changed the interval between the canonic entries from the fifth to the fourth (see bars 108, 116, and 124); that is, here the music had to be written in such a way that the first two bars of the initial voice in a new canonic line at the fourth sounds melodically satisfying and harmonizes with the last two bars of the answering voice from the previous canonic line at the fifth and in such a way that the move from the last note in the answering voice at the fifth proceeds smoothly to the first note of the new answer at the fourth.

On first hearing this duet, I was haunted by the opening theme's elusive familiarity. Soon after, listening to the chorale that has come to be performed with Bach's motet *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf* (BWV 226), I stumbled upon the melodic resemblance between the cantata duet and the chorale "Komm, Heiliger Geist," a prayer to the Holy Spirit for regeneration and hymn of praise<sup>25</sup> (see example 1):

Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott,	Come, Holy Spirit, Lord God.
Erfüll mit deiner Gnaden Gut Deiner Gläubigen Herz, Mut und Sinn.	Fill with your treasure of grace the heart, will, and mind of yours in the faith.

25. The melodic allusion, it turns out, is also noted by Friedrich Smend, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Kirchen-Kantaten* (Berlin: Christlicher Zeitschriftenverlag, 1947–1949), 2:36–37. Smend sees further allusions to several other chorales elsewhere in Cantata 9, connections I consider coincidental or musically rather unconvincing. It should perhaps be mentioned that the chorale "O Gottes Geist, mein Trost und Rat," sung to the same melody as "Komm, Heiliger Geist," likewise concerns the Holy Spirit.

Dein brünstig Lieb entzünd in ihn'n.	Your ardent love inflame in them.
O Herr, durch deines Lichtes Glanz	O Lord, [you who] through your light's brilliance
Zu dem Glauben versammelt hast	to faith has gathered
Das Volk aus aller Welt Zungen;	people from all the world's tongues—
Das sei dir, Herr, zu Lob gesungen.	for that, Lord, may laud be sung to you.
Alleluja, alleluja.	Alleluia, alleluia.

**EXAMPLE 1**

Opening phrase of chorale "Komm, Heiliger Geist" with opening phrase of aria "Herr, du siehst statt guter Werke" (BWV 9).

Komm, heiliger Geist

Before drawing interpretive conclusions about Bach's musical setting of the aria, let us consider some doctrinal background. Bach, of course, knew about the ideas on justification put forth by Luther's followers in the *Book of Concord*,<sup>26</sup> and more direct documentation of Bach's familiarity with the subject can be found, for example, in his having highlighted within his Calov Bible Commentary a part of the interpolated commentary on Romans 1:16–17 (verses that are commonly regarded as the central theme of the epistle): "The main cause of blessedness is God whose word and power is the gospel,

26. See note 10.

as the means of blessedness. The effective cause however is Christ; the means on our side is faith which embraces the righteousness of Christ revealed in the gospel which alone belongs to faith. He who is thus vindicated is a sinful man who believes in Christ. The form is the righteousness of Christ which is imputed to us through faith. The final cause is life and eternal blessedness."<sup>27</sup>

Lutheranism never tired of asserting that only Jesus's imputed righteousness can bring about salvation. Robin Leaver sums it up aptly: "Luther will tenaciously hold on to the doctrine [of justification], because if it is overthrown, it would mean that Jesus Christ had been wasting His time on the cross."<sup>28</sup>

As it happens, almost all the essential aspects of the doctrine are laid out in the (sermonic) libretto of Bach's Cantata 9: Jesus has come as mediator, that is, before God the Father (opening chorus); humans were incapable of keeping God's law (first recitative and tenor aria); and so Jesus came to fulfill the law, and his death makes it possible for people to come before God the Father's wrath protected by their trust in Jesus (second recitative); faith, not good works, brings about salvation (duet); after they have recognized their sin from the law, people can find comfort in the gospel, and they need not fear death (third recitative); people should not be troubled if it seems as though God is not with them, for the essence of faith is in things unseen (closing chorale).<sup>29</sup>

The only basic doctrinal aspects missing from the libretto are that Christian faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit and that the fruits of faith, good works—though unnecessary in the sense that they

27. Calov, *Die heilige Bibel*, 6:19; translation taken from Cox, *Calov Bible*, 449–450. Calov earlier on this page makes harsh statements, not highlighted by Bach, about the faithlessness of Jews and their eternal ruin.

28. Robin A. Leaver, *Luther on Justification* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), 23–24.

29. The libretto quotes stanzas 1 and 12 literally and paraphrases stanzas 2–9 and 11 of Paul Speratus's "Es ist das Heil uns kommen her" (1523), a fourteen-stanza chorale devoted to the subject of justification.

cannot bring about salvation—are necessary in the sense that they are commanded by God<sup>30</sup> and in that they act as testimonies of the Holy Spirit's presence and indwelling.

Bach's musical setting appears to provide the doctrinal aspects missing from the libretto of Cantata 9.<sup>31</sup> This happens in ways that are perhaps not immediately obvious but are easy enough to hear if pointed out. The chorale allusion in the canonic duet conjures up both the notion that it is the Holy Spirit who gathers people to faith (chorale "Komm Heiliger Geist," first stanza, lines 5–8) and the notion that sinners, already justified, need the Holy Spirit to do God's ongoing work of sanctification ("Komm Heiliger Geist," lines 1–4). Canonic writing has associations with law in Bach,<sup>32</sup> and there is a certain Lutheran elegance in Bach's having set uncommonly beautiful, carefree-sounding melodies to such severe forms of counterpoint in Cantata 9. It is as if to say that law and gospel, good works and grace through faith, are inextricably bound up with each other, though they remain distinct. The Lutheranism of Bach's music apparently contends that justified sinners are not to put the law behind them. Regeneration is always incomplete in the present world, and the children of God are still to be guided by the law of God. If the musical setting of the opening aria from Cantata 13 can be understood to express God's Yes behind a No, the setting of the duet from Cantata 9 may express God's No behind a Yes.

## An Inverted World

One of the most peculiar movements in Bach's output is the aria "Wie jammern mich doch die verkehrten Herzen" from his church cantata *Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust* (BWV 170). Having

30. On this point, see the bass recitative from Bach's church cantata *Wer da gläubet und getauft wird* (BWV 37).

31. These are to be found in stanzas 10 and 13 of Speratus's chorale (see note 29).

32. See Marissen, "The Theological Character," 98–105 (chapter 7 in this book).

gloriously depicted the peace and contentment of heaven in the opening movement, this second aria comments as follows on the intervening recitative's condemnation of the evil and perversity of the present world:

Wie jammern mich doch die verkehrten Herzen,	How I surely pity the froward hearts
Die dir, mein Gott, so sehr zuwider sein;	that toward you, my God, are so very contrary.
Ich zittre recht und fühle tausend Schmerzen,	I truly tremble and feel a thou- sand agonies,
Wenn sie nur an Rach und Haß erfreun.	when all they do is delight in vengeance and hate.
Gerechter Gott, was magst du doch gedenken,	Righteous God, what would you but have to contemplate,
Wenn sie allein mit rechten Satansränken	when they with truly satanic machinations
Dein scharfes Strafgebot so frech verlacht.	so boldly only laugh at your strict decree of punishment.
Ach! ohne Zweifel hast du so gedacht:	Ah! without a doubt you have thus thought:
Wie jammern mich doch die verkehrten Herzen!	"How I surely pity the froward hearts"!

With its slow tempo, F-sharp minor tonality, pervasive dissonances, and so on, Bach's musical setting fittingly plumbs the depths of the libretto's torment. Some commentators take notice also of Bach's unusual instrumental scoring: three-part counterpoint consisting of a lower line for violins and viola in unison and two upper lines for organ obbligato. Alfred Dürr, for example, suggestively argues that the absence of a proper basso continuo is most likely intentional on Bach's part; the basso continuo is a sort of fundament, and its absence can symbolize either that a Godly foothold is not needed (as, for example, in the aria "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben" from Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*) or that such a

foothold has been lost (for example, as here in Cantata 170 and in the aria “Wie zittern und wanken der Sünder Gedanken” from Bach’s church cantata *Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht mit deinem Knecht* [BWV 105]).<sup>33</sup>

Bach’s instrumental scoring deserves still closer consideration. The rhythmic activity in the organ lines is typically twice and often four times as great as in the unison strings line. Such textural stratification is rather unusual in Bach, and so this heightened contrast between the upper and lower lines surely commands our attention. Much more than an extreme instrumental contrast, what Bach’s music, in fact, sets up here is a *reversal*: criss-crossing, highly expressive lines that have very much the look of solo violin parts were assigned, by the marking *à 2 Clav.* (“for two manuals”), to the large church organ; and a simple, stolid, continuo-like line that has very much the look of a pedals-only organ part was assigned to the upper strings of Bach’s ensemble, *in unisono*. For Bach, it would have been a straightforward affair to arrange this aria “properly” by transposing the organ lines as violin parts and by shifting the strings line into the lower octave for organ and furnishing it with continuo figures.<sup>34</sup>

33. Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, 435.

34. For a convenient, brief explanation of Bach’s various pitch standards for keyboard, orchestral, and vocal parts, see Melamed and Marissen, *Introduction to Bach Studies*, 142–145. For more on the notion of meaningful reversals of scoring in Bach, see Marissen, *The Social and Religious Designs*. Hans-Joachim Schulze, “Bach in the Early Twenty-first Century,” in *The Worlds of Johann Sebastian Bach*, edited by Raymond Erickson (Milwaukee: Amadeus Press, 2009), 297–98, oddly deems this study of Bach’s concertos an example of the “types of interpretation [that involve] The Search for Hidden Meanings.” (There is, however, in *The Social and Religious Designs* no hint of any search for “hidden meanings.”) Schulze notes the case in point of the sixth concerto, whose scoring, he says, “[Marissen interprets] as candid criticism of the conditions at the Anhalt-Cöthen court.” (There is, however, in *The Social and Religious Designs* no suggestion that the sixth concerto is to be interpreted as criticism of the conditions at the Anhalt-Cöthen court.) Schulze goes on to state that for this concerto, Bach was only following a scoring convention of the previous century. (In fact, however, virtuoso violas accompanied by rudimentary

This aria's curious reversal in scoring may be associated with the time-honored theme of the World Upside Down. The *mundus inversus*—in German, *verkehrte Welt*—has appeared in all cultures in a wide variety of forms.<sup>35</sup> In visual representations, for example, a castle or city hovers above the clouds, a sheep protects the flock of humans grazing in a meadow, a servant rides on horseback while the nobleman has to go behind him on foot, a mouse chases the cat, and so on.

The theme of inversion also plays a significant part in Jewish and Christian biblical writings, often proposing messianic or utopian situations in which the present disordered world will be upended.<sup>36</sup> For example, the statement “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” appears frequently in the New Testament<sup>37</sup> (and Bach's powerful, verbatim setting of it appears in the opening chorus from Cantata 47, *Wer sich selbst erhöht, der soll erniedriget werden*; see also Bach's

gambas was never conventional.) In his wrap-up, Schulze suggests that “[more recent research] showing that Bach was merely perpetuating a scoring convention of the seventeenth century . . . in turn, has led to a disillusionment with such types of interpretation [as were put forward in Marissen's book].” The research cited as having shown that Bach was simply in keeping with earlier convention is Ares Rolf, “Die Besetzung des sechsten Brandenburgischen Konzerts,” *Bach-Jahrbuch* 84 (1998): 171–181; see also Ares Rolf, *J. S. Bach, Das sechste Brandenburgische Konzert: Besetzung, Analyse, Entstehung* (Dortmund: Klangfarben Musikverlag, 2002), 25–41, 145–168. The disillusionment Schulze speaks of appears to have been unwarranted, as it happens that Bach's treatment of the instruments in the Sixth Brandenburg Concerto radically differs from all of the seventeenth-century musical examples provided in Rolf's two studies.

35. See Michael Kuper, “Zur Topographie der verkehrten Welt,” in *Zur Semiotik der Inversion* (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 1993), 10–18; David Kunzle, “World Upside Down: The Iconography of a European Broadsheet Type,” in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, edited by Barbara A. Hancock (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 39–94.

36. See Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Proverbs 30:21–23 and the Biblical World Upside Down,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986): 599–610; and Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 164.

37. For a discussion of rabbinic parallels, see Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 80.



settings of the *Magnificat*). Status reversal is said by various New Testament authors to characterize the Kingdom of God.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, in religious usage, symbolic inversion can be extreme. While particular examples may seem humorous on the surface (depending on one's point of view), the underlying intent can be very serious. Especially striking examples of this are found in the woodcuts that Luther and his early followers produced to spread Reformation ideas.<sup>39</sup> All the major elements appear in Luther's own wildly polemical series, the *Depiction of the Papacy* (1545).<sup>40</sup> Robert Scribner helpfully analyzes the woodcut *Adoratur Papa Deus Terrenus* ("The Pope Is Adored as an Earthly God") from this collection as follows (see Figure 1):<sup>41</sup>

[In this picture, the] crossed papal keys have been replaced by a pair of jemmies, which the Germans call "thieves' keys." The papal tiara which should be above the shield has been inverted, and a German mercenary soldier, a *Landsknecht*, defecates into it. Two others adjust their dress after having done the same. The Latin title states satirically: "The pope is adored as an earthly god." The German inscription comments that the pope has treated the kingdom of Christ as the pope's crown is treated here. But do not despair, it continues, for God has promised comfort through his spirit. A reference to Apocalypse 18 [that is, the final book in the New Testament] shows what that comfort is to be: the proclamation that Babylon has been overthrown, that is, that the

38. See, for example, Matthew 18:4, 20:26–27, 23:11–12; Mark 9:35, 10:42–44; Luke 9:48, 14:11, 18:14, 22:26; Philippians 2:5–11; James 4:4–10; 1 Peter 5:5.

39. See the fascinating discussion by Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk*, 163–189.

40. Martin Luther, "Abbildung des Pabsttums (1545)," in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 54, edited by O. Clemen and J. Luther, 346–373 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1928), this illustration (no. 11) at p. [542].

41. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk*, 81–82.

## ADORATVR PAPA DEVS TERRENVS.



Bapst hat dem reich Christi gethon  
 Wie man hie handelt seine Cron.  
 Nachts jr zweifeltig: spricht der geist <sup>Apoc. 18.</sup>  
 Schenckt getrost ein: Gott ist's ders heist.  
 Mart: Luth: D.

11. Adoratur Papa Deus Terrenus.  
 („Eiara“) Krieg, Gymnasialbibliothek.

## FIGURE 1

“Adoratur Papa Deus Terrenus,” from Martin Luther, *Depiction of the Papacy* (1545).

downfall of the papacy [indeed, the end of the world]<sup>42</sup> is at hand. . . . The written text adds two varying messages to the visual message. The German text provides a quasi-doctrinal

42. That Luther's various polemics in part reflect a belief that he was living in the end times is argued in great detail by Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, translated by James I. Porter (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

commentary; the Latin title, however, captures the wood-cut's intention more closely: it is an ironic inversion.

In the context of religious symbolic inversion, then, Bach's strange scoring in Cantata 170 could be understood to extend substantially the meaning of Lehms's aria text. While Lehms's poetry depicts only this-worldly despair, Bach's musical setting, by virtue of its extreme World Upside Down scoring, inspires also next-worldly comfort.

As a second example of the *mundus inversus*, let us briefly consider the duet from Bach's church cantata *Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten* (BWV 93). Bach lovers tend to be familiar not with the cantata movement but with its arrangement for solo organ as the Schübler chorale *Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten* (BWV 647). When, for example, I played recordings of the two versions in a lecture for a Philadelphia meeting of the American Guild of Organists, many in the audience registered great surprise at Bach's scoring in the cantata. They altogether reasonably assumed that the two soprano lines of the right-hand part in the organ version originated in a standard treble scoring for strings or woodwinds and that the chorale line of the pedal part (designated in the four-foot range) originated in a single vocal line, more or less corresponding to the situation for the extremely well-known fourth movement from Bach's church cantata *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* (BWV 140) and its arrangement in the Schübler chorales (BWV 645). The situation in Cantata 93 turns out to be exactly the reverse: to the unaltered, well-known words of the fourth chorale stanza, the singers render various quasi-"instrumental" interludes, and wordlessly in unison the violins and viola "sing" in longer note values the phrase-by-phrase entries of the chorale melody.<sup>43</sup>

43. Instrumental renderings of chorale melodies are not so unusual in the Bach cantata repertory. It is unusual, however, to find chorale poetry sung verbatim to new or varied melodic material while instruments alone provide the corresponding chorale melody in longer note values. For another example of this sort of reversal, see the duet from Bach's church cantata *Meine Seele erhebt den Herren* (BWV 10). Compare also the fourth movement from *Lobe den Herren, den mächtigen König der Ehren* (BWV 137) and the opening movements from *Wär Gott nicht mit uns diese Zeit* (BWV 14) and *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (BWV 80).

The text of the employed chorale stanza reads as follows:

Er kennt die rechten	He knows the right times for
Freudenstunden,	joy,
Er weiß wohl, wenn	he knows well, when it may
es nützlich sei;	be beneficial;
Wenn er uns nur hat treu	if he only has found us
erfunden	faithful
Und merket keine	and notes no hypocrisy,
Heuchelei,	
So kömmt Gott, eh wir uns	then God comes, before we
versehn,	are aware of it,
Und lässet uns viel Guts	and lets much good happen
geschehn.	to us.

With the miniature *mundus inversus* of this cantata duet, Bach's music appears to be deliberately working against human expectations, as if, again, to give expression to the idea that God's heavenly ways do not correspond to humans' earthly ways.

Such ideas are readily found in the sermon literature from Bach's library. Bach owned two copies of Luther's *Hauspostille*,<sup>44</sup> a collection of sermons on the biblical readings specified for the various Sundays and festivals of the church year in the Lutheran liturgy. The sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Trinity (the Sunday for which Cantata 93 was written), based on the gospel reading of Luke 5:1–11,<sup>45</sup> contains the following illuminating passage (my emphasis):

We are commanded . . . to wait patiently for success, and God's blessing shall be experienced in due time. . . . [Peter]

44. Wolff, *New Bach Reader*, 253–254. The *Hauspostille* was issued in the sixteenth century in two somewhat different versions, one edited by Veit Dietrich and the other by Georg Rörer. Both were frequently reprinted, and, as Robin Leaver points out, the fact that Bach owned two copies of the *Hauspostille* suggests that he had both versions; see Robin Leaver, "Bach's Understanding and Use of the Epistles and Gospels of the Church Year," *Bach* 6, no. 4 (1975): 5.

45. The gospel reports that after his disciples had caught no fish all night, Jesus tells them the next day to go out to sea and cast their nets; their ships nearly sink from the massive intake.

must have had a pious heart, that he so subdued his natural inclinations and held firmly to the Word of Christ. Here as under many other circumstances the commands and dealings of God seem to our reason to be all wrong or even foolish. The best time for catching fishes is ordinarily not mid-day, but night. Neither is it the custom of fishermen to launch out into the deep, that is, in the midst of the sea, but they remain near the shore, for they well know that here many fish are to be found. *This is reversed by the Savior.*<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

It seems from these selected church cantata examples, then, that we might not be fully appreciating Bach's output if we take him simply or essentially to be a supplier of pitches, rhythms, and tone colors, however marvelous or magnificent these rich aspects of his works may indeed be. Likewise, we might not fully appreciate the range of plausible meanings projected by Bach's works if we simply analyze the verbal content of his librettos. Accepting the idea that Bach's musical settings can theologically expand upon and interpret his librettos need not involve downplaying the aesthetic splendor of his works. I would like to suggest, moreover, that insisting on exclusively aesthetic contemplation of Bach's music potentially diminishes its meanings and actually reduces its stature.

46. Martin Luther, "Fifth Sunday after Trinity," in *Dr. Martin Luther's House-Postil*, vol. 3, edited by Matthias Loy, translated by E. Schmid (Columbus: J. A. Schulze, 1884), 123 (this is the Dietrich version of the *Hauspostille*); Martin Luther, "Am Fünfften Sonntag nach der Trifeltigkeit—Evangelion Luce 5," in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 52, *Hauspostille*, edited by Georg Buchwald (Weimar: Böhlau, 1915), 399.