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“Ich elender Mensch”: Bach on the Soul’s Torment

In a particularly dramatic recitative in Cantata 48, the alto sings the following words:

“O Schmerz, o Elend, so mich trifft,
Indem der Sünden Gift
Bei mir in Brust und Adern wütet:
Die Welt wird mir ein Siech- und Sterbehaus,
Der Leib muß seine Plagen
Bis zu dem Grabe mit sich tragen.
Allein die Seele fühlet den stärksten Gift,
Damit sie angestecket;
Dum wenn der Schmerz den Leib des Todes trifft,
Wenn ihr der Kreuzkelch bitter schmecket,
So treibt er ihr ein brünstig Seufzen aus”.

Comparable sentiments are found in the third movement of Cantata 78, *Jesu, der du meine Seele*. The text for this recitative amplifies stanzas 3–5 of the chorale on which the cantata is based:

“Ach! ich bin ein Kind der Sünden,
Ach! ich irre weit und breit.
Der Sünden Aussatz, so an mir zu finden,
Verläßt mich nicht in dieser Sterblichkeit.
Mein Wille trachtet nur nach Bösen.
Der Geist zwar spricht: ach! wer wird mich erlösen?
Aber Fleisch und Blut zu zwingen
Und das Gute zu vollbringen,
Ist über alle meine Kraft.
Will ich den Schaden nicht verhehlen,
So kann ich nicht, wie oft ich fehle, zählen”.

Bach responded to these texts with settings of remarkable intensity. In the case of BWV 48/2, Bach employed a disjunct chromaticism so extensive, it incorporates all twelve tones in the first seven measures of the voice part and

¹ With thanks to Stephen Crist, Alfred Mann, and Renate Steiger for several helpful suggestions.

yet again in the next six. In the case of BWV 78/3 he incorporates all twelve chromatic tones (the complete tonal gamut) in the first seven measures of the vocal part, and does so again in the following seven².

To better understand Bach's compositional choices let us look at the theological context of the above texts. Both of them deal with the cardinal Christian doctrine of original sin, focusing particularly on the enduring effects experienced by the individual Christian as a physical and spiritual malady that torments him continually. In the first example, the phrases "Leib des Todes" and "ein brünstig Seufzen" refer the listener to two passages in Paul's letter to the Romans; namely, Rom. 7:24 and 8:26. At this point in the cantata, the former text has already appeared in the first movement: "Ich elender Mensch, wer wird mich erlösen vom Leibe dieses Todes?"³ The example from Cantata 78 identifies more specifically the source of the believer's anguish: while he mentally assents to the law of God, he finds himself incapable of keeping it – he is totally powerless, and in total desperation. Of particular theological interest are the words "Wer wird mich erlösen ...". Again the biblical source of the text is unambiguously identified: Rom. 7, where the apostle Paul describes his soul struggle:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin" (Rom. 7:15–25).

Luther's emphasis on *sola fide*

Upon first consideration, it seems strange that a Lutheran poet should be so exercised over the soul's inability to measure up to the divine standard, for one of the cardinal tenets of Luther's theology is that justification comes by faith alone. However, Luther's emphasis on justification by faith did not per-

2 Bach's "piano" marking at the beginning of the continuo part is very unusual and, according to Dreyfus, may have been intended to ensure a "special tenuto rendition". See Laurence Dreyfus: *Bach's Continuo Group*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1987, p. 243.

3 In this article I retain the masculine gender as used in the Bible and Luther.

mit disregard for the moral requirements of God's law. Rather, good works were expected as evidence of true faith. Paul Althaus summarizes Luther's position this way:

"Indeed, Luther explains, God's justifying forgiveness is partially dependent on man's having taken up the battle of the Spirit against the flesh. If this battle is missing and a man persists in gross sins, then he is not a Christian and he does not stand under God's forgiveness. Accordingly, Luther declares positively that new obedience, the battle with sin, good works, and love make us and others certain that our faith is true and thereby that we are saved"⁴.

Luther's view on the human will

According to Luther's concept of original sin⁵, human will is inherently corrupt – completely enslaved, unable even to choose the good. When the great Roman Catholic theologian Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1466–1536) took issue with him, arguing that God's laws implied an ability to obey, Luther responded in 1525 with his famous rebuttal, *De servo arbitrio*⁶:

"God is trying us, that by His law He may bring us to a knowledge of our impotence, if we are His friends [...] or else, He is really and deservedly taunting and mocking us, if we are His enemies. [...] For this, as Paul teaches, is the intent of divine legislation (cf. Rom. 3:20, 5:20, Gal. 3:19, 24). Human nature is blind, so that it does not know its own strength – or, rather, *sickness*; moreover, being proud, it thinks it knows and can do everything. God can cure this pride and ignorance by no readier remedy than the publication of His law. [...]

Hence, [T]he work of Satan is to hold men so that they do not recognize their wretchedness, but presume that they can do everything that is stated. But the work of Moses the lawgiver is the opposite of this – namely, through the law to lay open to man his own wretchedness, so that, by thus breaking him down, and confounding him in his self-knowledge, he may make him ready for grace, and *send him to Christ to be saved*".

Luther's doctrine of simul justus et peccator

According to Luther, even after a person had "come to Christ" in faith, constant struggle with temptation was to be expected. The soul's torment described in Rom. 7 was understood to refer to just such a person – not an

⁴ Paul Althaus: *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz, Philadelphia 1966, pp. 246–247.

⁵ See the ensuing discussion regarding Bach's interest in the doctrine of original sin.

⁶ James Innell Packer and Olaf Raymond Johnston: *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will*. A new translation of *De Servo arbitrio* (1525), *Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam*, Westwood, New Jersey 1957. Luther considered this his most worthy work, writing in 1537, that none of them deserved preservation except the little children's Catechism and *The Bondage of the Will*. See Packer (this note), p. 40.

unregenerate one, who had no hope of keeping God's law, but a believer, in whom the conflict between the old (unregenerate) and new (regenerate) natures was raging.

In understanding Rom. 7 to be a depiction of the inner state of a believer, Luther followed Augustine, who wrote: "This warfare is characteristic of faithful Christians"⁷. Thus Luther could himself write: "I am at the same time a sinner and a righteous man, for I do evil and I hate the evil which I do"⁸. Paul Althaus summarizes:

"We can now understand the meaning of Luther's famous formula which describes the Christian as at one and the same time a righteous man and a sinner, *simul justus et peccator*. [...] This contradiction [...] does not cease in this life but continues until death. Yet it is not a static relationship but is constantly in movement between these two opposing poles. [...] The constant renewal of [a man's] surrender to God's working in [him] results in the progressive death of the old man and the resurrection of the new man"⁹.

Bach's particular interest in the doctrine of original sin is evident from markings he made in his Calov Bible commentary – especially his notations in Calov's expositions of Gen. 3:7 and Rom. 8:22.

Bach's Musical Settings: Law and Gospel in Cantatas 48 and 78

How do Bach's musical settings of texts taking up these ideas reflect their theological underpinnings? We have already noted the overt, comprehensive chromaticism in Cantatas 48 and 78. Let us now take a closer look at these two works.

BWV 48/1

The first movement of BWV 48, *Ich elender Mensch*, combines three distinct complexes. First, a twelve-measure ritornello presents arpeggios in an ascending sequence that becomes increasingly chromatic. The melody's sequential construction (delineated with repetitions of the *Seufzer* figure with which the basic motive ends), together with the increasing prevalence of diminished seventh chords, propels the ritornello forward with ever greater urgency. The melodic line struggles upward, rising, then falling back, in an affective representation of the soul's struggle, which is so vividly verbalized at the end of the following movement.

7 Hilton C. Oswald, ed.: Luther's Works, Saint Louis 1972, vol. 25 ("Lectures on Romans"), p. 63.

8 Ibid.

9 Althaus (n. 4), pp. 242–245.

The completeness of the chromaticism – perhaps symbolizing here the “completeness” of human depravity¹⁰ – can be quantified: in the uppermost part (Vln. I) all twelve tones are covered in the ritornello’s twelve-measure span. The ritornello as a whole appears five times: while the first and third statements stand alone, the second and fourth overlap the vocal segments on both ends. The fifth statement is expanded to fourteen measures (mm. 104–117), eight of which overlap vocal parts.

The second complex comprises the vocal parts, which are canonic/fugal in nature. A two-part canonic “motto” (at the fifth below) begins in soprano and alto. After an intervening ritornello, the vocal material returns, expanded now to a four-part fugal exposition (B/T/S/A). The entire 44-measure complex (ritornello – motto – ritornello – fugal exposition) is then repeated but with the vocal statements changed. The canonic motto is now presented in tenor and bass and the voice order in the fugal exposition reversed to A/S/T/B. Two more imitative sections then appear, separated by the fifth (and final) ritornello statement.

Above the vocal parts (and, at times, the ritornello), a canon between trumpet and two unison oboes presents a chorale at the interval of a perfect fourth below, with the *comes* usually following the *dux* after two measures. For the final chorale phrase, the interval is shortened to one measure (see m. 127). Not surprisingly, the repetition inherent in the chorale’s basic structure (ABABCDE) corresponds with Bach’s large-scale repetition described above. The overall architecture of the movement may be represented thus:

* Rit. 1	* Trp/Ob canon (= “A”)	* Rit. 2	* Trp/Ob canon (= “B”)	*
*	* S/A canon	*	* B/T/S/A fugato	*
<hr/>				
* Rit. 3	* Trp/Ob canon (= “A”)	* Rit. 4	* Trp/Ob canon (= “B”)	*
*	* T/B canon	*	* A/S/T/B fugato	*
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Trp/Ob canon (= “C”)		* Rit. 5	* Trp/Ob canon (= “DE”)	
Ritornello material		*	* Ritornello material	
2 fugatos: A/S-T/B– (SATB hemiola)–		*	* 2 fugatos: S+A/T/B–T/B/S/A	
S/A/T/B				

10 While the inference that Bach intended the completeness of the pitch set (perhaps within particular spans) to signify the totality of the fall is speculative and probably ultimately unprovable, we find supportive evidence elsewhere. In Bach’s chorale prelude BWV 637, *Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt*, for example, all twelve tones are presented in the accompanying parts to the first chorale phrase, whose text reads, “by Adam’s fall everything was spoiled”.

Upon closer examination we see that the primary motive of the voice parts mirrors the chorale's opening eight-note phrase; specifically, the primary motive comprises a retrograde version of chorale notes 3, 4, 5, 6.

Such masterful construction reminds one of a passage from Bach's obituary:

"No one ever showed so many ingenious and unusual ideas as he in elaborate pieces, which may ordinarily seem dry exercises in craftsmanship. He needed only to hear a theme to recognize – it seemed instantaneously – almost every intricacy that artistry could produce in the treatment of it"¹¹.

But is there more here than evidence of Bach's ability to recognize and exploit the latent possibilities of particular thematic material and an attempt to move the listener emotionally with rhetorically prescribed chromatic harmonies? Are aspects of Bach's setting symbolic? Admittedly, we now move into the area of inference. Nevertheless, let us see what some of the connections between the text and Bach's settings suggest. Bach's use of canon is an obvious place to start. Its very definition suggests the possibility of symbolic usage. As we noted above, the text of this movement points to Rom. 7, where two "rules" or "laws" are described: the law of sin served by the flesh and the law of God served by the mind. We see these laws reflected in Bach's two canonic structures¹². The vocal canon evidently represents the "law of sin", for the verbal text expresses the soul's torment at being enslaved to this law: "Wretched man that I am [...]"

Meanwhile, the instrumental canon provides hope with an implied chorale text¹³. While at least four different texts were associated with this tune, any one of them could serve as unspoken answer to the rhetorical question

11 Bach-Dokumente. Ed. by Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze, 4 vols., Leipzig 1963–1979, vol. 3, p. 87. See also Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, eds.: *The New Bach Reader: A life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, revised and enlarged by Christoph Wolff, New York 1998, p. 305.

12 With regard to Bach's symbolic use of strict counterpoint, Robin Leaver writes: "In a number of Bach's [...] vocal works the theological distinction between Law and Gospel is expressed in musical form. In the *St. John Passion* (BWV 245) Law is depicted in the strict counterpoint of *Wir haben ein Ges[et]z*, and the grace of the Gospel is expressed in the much freer imitative counterpoint of *Ich folge dir gleichfalls*. Similarly, in the cantata *Gottes Zeit* (BWV 106) the demand of Law, expressed fugally by 'Es ist der alte Bund,' is contrasted by the freedom of the Gospel, 'Ja, komm, Herr Jesu,' in which the soprano floats freely away, unencumbered by the basso continuo". See Robin A. Leaver: *Johann Sebastian Bach. Theological Musician and Musical Theologian*, in: *BACH XXXI/1* (2000), pp. 17–33; esp. p. 32.

13 In a paper entitled "Historical Theology and Hymnology as Tools for Interpreting Bach's Cantata *Ich Elender Mensch, wer wird mich erlösen* (BWV 48)", delivered at the Third Dortmund Bach-Symposium, January 31, 2000, Stephen Crist notes that at least four different texts were associated with this tune "from the time of its first appearance in the late sixteenth

posed by the voices, as Stephen Crist has shown. Since the final movement of the cantata, which uses the same tune, employs the final stanza of "Herr Jesu Christ, ich schrei zu dir" it is possible that Bach intended the listener to "hear" the words of one of that hymn's earlier stanzas, perhaps the sixth one, which reads:

"Herr Jesu Christ das Elend mein
 wolst gnädiglich ansehen:
 Durch die heiligen fünf Wunden dein
 hör mein Gebet und Flehen
 welch Tag und Nacht mit Angst und Schmerz
 zu dir ausgeußt mein traurigs Herz.
 Ach laß dichs doch erbarmen".

While this text, like the stated one in the voice parts, is the anguished cry of a troubled conscience, it already points to the remedy, the answer to the question posed by the voices, "Who will deliver me?" Bach's listeners would have known this answer even before the musicians had finished performing the first movement. Not only would they have known the biblical continuation of Bach's libretto, which presents Paul's answer ("Who will deliver me? – Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"), but many would also

century through the first quarter of the eighteenth century: 'Herr Jesu Christ, ich schrei zu dir' (as in BWV 48/7) and two other chorales having to do with death and dying ('Wenn mein Stündlein vorhanden ist' and 'Herr Jesu Christ, ich weiß gar wohl'), plus one on themes of confession and repentance ('Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut'). With their references to Christ, any or all of them could serve as unspoken answer(s) to the rhetorical question posed by the voices. Alfred Dürr: *Die Kantaten von Johann Sebastian Bach*, fifth ed. Kassel 1985, 2:640, notes that in Bach's time the most common text associated with this tune was Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut. The first stanza describes the torment of the conscience-stricken soul:

"Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut,
 Du Brunnquell aller Gnaden,
 Sieh doch, wie ich in meinem Mur
 Mit Schmerzen bin beladen
 Und in mir hab der Pfeile viel,
 Die im Gewissen ohne Ziel
 Mich armen Sünder drücken".

In this connection see also William Gillies Whittaker: *The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach*, Sacred and Secular, second ed., London 1959, vol. 2, p. 201. However, in personal correspondence with the author, Renate Steiger argues that a more logical approach is to look at earlier stanzas of the hymn Bach used to end the cantata (i.e., "Herr Jesu Christ, ich schrei zu dir"). She notes parallels between the hymn's sixth stanza and the text of 48/1: key words: "elender Mensch" – "mein Elend"; and similar cries to Christ for mercy: "wer wird mich erlösen?" – "laß dichs doch erbarmen". She also notes the parallelism between the hymn writer's reference to the means by which salvation is achieved ("durch die heiligen fünf Wunden dein") and Bach's musical structure: a five-fold presentation of the ritornello.

have recognized the chorale tune and called to mind the opening stanza of one of the texts commonly associated with this tune.

The five appearances of the ritornello, too, may be intentionally symbolic. Perhaps they point to Christ, for five was often used to signify the crucified Christ¹⁴. In any event, Bach evidently intended his audience to hear this first movement as an ultimately hopeful/positive one – although the final cadence (I–V in C minor) may be heard as an interrogative, thus reflecting the question mark of the text¹⁵.

BWV 48/2

The second movement of Cantata 48, the alto recitative we encountered earlier¹⁶, presents the penitent believer. The extensive chromaticism of the vocal line – already noted – is underscored by the string accompaniment, which “trace[s] in sustained notes the sometimes adventurous harmonic trajectory” (to borrow the words of Stephen Crist)¹⁷. Of special interest is the migration from flats to sharps in mm. 10–13, at the words:

“Allein die Seele fühlet den stärksten¹⁸ Gift,
Damit sie angestecket;
Drum, wenn der Schmerz den Leib des Todes trifft,
Wenn ihr der Kreuzkelch bitter schmecket,
So treibt er ihr ein brünstig Seufzen aus”.

The reference here is to the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical effects of original sin. Just as the day's Gospel reading emphasizes Jesus' decision to heal the paralytic's spiritual condition before his physical ail-

14 See Arthur Hirsch: *Die Zahl im Kantatenwerk Johann Sebastian Bachs*, Neuhausen-Stuttgart 1986, p. 5: “Die Zahl 5 wurde von früh an mit dem Menschen assoziiert, denn er hat 5 Sinne, 5 Finger und 5 Zehen. Die 5 Wunden am Kreuz machten dieselbe Zahl zum Sinnbild für den Mensch gewordenen Gott”. (The number 5 became associated with humanity early on, for a human being has 5 senses, 5 fingers, and 5 toes. The 5 wounds of the cross made the same number into an emblem for the God become man [i.e., Christ].) See also previous note.

15 All movements in this cantata except one end on a major chord: G♯M – B♯M – B♯M – E♯M – B♯M – G♯m – G♯M.

16 Hirsch notes that, in Bach's cantatas, the alto often represents the penitent or suffering person; the soprano, the believing soul. See Hirsch (n. 14), p. 4.

17 Stephen A. Crist: “Ich elender Mensch”, in: J. S. Bach. *Oxford Composer Companions*. Ed. Malcolm Boyd, Oxford 1999, p. 227. It is interesting to note that Violin I begins with a transposed version of B – H – C – A (F♯ – E – F – D). Somewhat similarly, in the opening movement, the continuo bass plays H – C – A – B (see mm. 31–33 / 74–77 for a non-transposed version, and mm. 91–93 for a transposed statement). Whether or not Bach intended these as B – A – C – H statements is unclear.

18 = “das stärkste”; see Werner Neumann: *Sämtliche von Johann Sebastian vertonte Texte*, Leipzig 1974, p. 139.

ment ("Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven [...] rise, take up your bed and go home"), so this text identifies the spiritual malady as the more serious one¹⁹. With the words, "wenn ihr der Kreuzkelch bitter schmecket" the poet makes allusion to a constellation of scripture passages referring to crucifixion²⁰: Jesus' prayer before his own crucifixion, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Mt. 26:39); Jesus' words to the disciples, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark. 10:38) – and reminds the listener of various passages from the Pauline epistles: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death [...] our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin" (Rom. 6:4.6–7); "Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt" (Eph. 4:22, a verse taken from the day's epistle); "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you" (Col. 3:5); "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Eph. 5:24). In theological terms, the solution to the ongoing affliction of the old nature is self-crucifixion, something naturally abhorrent. Recognizing the theological dimensions of this text, Bach expresses the poet's anguish with a symbolic migration to chords employing predominantly sharps. Thus Bach's text-painting is not only aural but also visual/verbal, for the German term "Kreuz" also signifies "sharp"²¹.

The anguish of the text is also reflected in the preponderance of diminished seventh chords. According to the figuring of both autograph score and original parts, the recitative contains seven diminished seventh chords: they appear on the words "Gift" ("poison" – m. 3), "Plagen" ("plagues" – m. 7), "Grabe" ("grave" – m. 7), "fühlet" ("feels" – m. 9), "Schmerz" ("pain" – m. 12), "Kreuzkelch" ("cross's chalice" – m. 13), and "brünstig" ("passionate" – m. 15).

19 Some Lutheran theologians understood the man's physical condition as emblematic of the spiritual paralysis of all sinners. Luther himself had presented this interpretation in a sermon of 1533 for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity. See *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar 1883–, vol. 52, p. 503, cited in Crist's paper "Historical Theology and Hymnology as Tools" (n. 13).

20 Renate Steiger has suggested that this phrase may also allude to stanza 10 of the chorale "Herr Jesu Christ, ich schrei zu dir," where we find the phrase, "hilf mir mein Kreuz ertragen". She also notes that both hymn stanza and recitative text use the key word "Plagen". (Personal correspondence with the writer.)

21 Eric Chafe writes that sometimes the "confrontation of sharps and flats suggests the idea of a 'separation of body and soul'". In this movement specifically, "torment both of body and soul are confronted". See Eric T. Chafe: *Tonal Allegory in the Music of J. S. Bach*, Berkeley 1991, p. 196.

Obviously, Bach's intention was to color the emotion-laden words of the text in this movement. In view of the prominence given to the number 7 in both Cantatas 48 and 78, it is also possible that he wanted to achieve exactly seven diminished seventh chords. Assuming that the figure in m. 7 was correct as written (and the viola note, therefore, incorrect), Bach may have changed the one in m. 2 to a ninth chord not only to achieve the more pungent sound on the word "Elend," but to reduce the total of diminished seventh chords to seven. In any case, we can summarize our observations about Bach's use of pitch materials in the second movement this way:

- 12 pitch classes in 7 measures of the vocal line (mm. 1–7)
- 12 pitch classes in 6 measures of the vocal line (mm. 8–13)
- 7 diminished seventh chords in total (assuming the *BG* reading in m. 7)

BWV 48/3

The third movement is a chorale, whose text is taken from the hymn "Ach Gott und Herr". Several hymnals in Bach's day designated the hymn as one suitable for the 19th Sunday after Trinity²². From a dramatic perspective, its unusual placement – between alto recitative and alto aria – allows the "chorus" to join the discussion²³. The tonality is the same as that of the foregoing recitative (B \flat major), so that the connection between the two functions grammatically like a colon. The text expresses the earnest prayer of the repentant believer, whose sentiments are reiterated in the aria that follows. As Robert Marshall has shown, Bach reworked the final measures, expanding them from two to three measures:

22 Renate Steiger noted to the author that the hymn is designated as such in the Lüneburg and Weimar hymnals, which were probably familiar to Bach, and that in the Eisenach hymnal it is listed with the hymns of repentance. See also Detlef Gojowy: *Lied und Sonntage in Gesangbüchern der Bach-Zeit*, in: *Bach-Jahrbuch* 58 (1972), pp. 24–60, esp. p. 57.

23 With regard to the unusual insertion of a chorale at this point, Renate Steiger notes the analogous homilical practice of quoting well-known hymn stanzas (in their entirety or selected phrases) in sermons, to great rhetorical effect due to their familiarity. (Passion librettists similarly often inserted chorale stanzas into their librettos for the same purpose.) In this connection Stephen Crist notes the contemporary phenomenon of the *Liedpredigt* (a sermon using a chorale text instead of the day's prescribed scripture reading as its basis), which sometimes stressed the curative effects (both spiritual and physical) of chorale singing. Source: Johann Avenarius: *Evangelischer Lieder-Catechismus*, Frankfurt a.M./Leipzig, 1714; cited in Crist, *Historical Theology and Hymnology as Tools* (n. 13). Steiger astutely observes, however, that the musical analogue of the *Liedpredigt* is the chorale cantata, not the pericope-based cantata, of which type Cantata 48 is an example.

"The correction [...] reveals in this case not a decision to write out a ritard but rather a desire to extend the final cadence on the word "büßen" ("do penance") with descending chromatic melismas in the middle parts"²⁴.

Bach's revisions also ensure (perhaps intentionally) that all twelve chromatic tones appear in the four parts of the final chorale phrase, all except one (C) appearing in the bass voice. Perhaps Bach intended to signal that the "completeness" of human depravity can only be met by "complete" repentance and conversion.

BWV 48/4

The ensuing alto aria continues the idea of the chorale text. If the poet must choose between the welfare of the body or the soul, the choice is clear: it is far more important to maintain a pure soul as God's place of abode (Zion) than to preserve one's physical health.

"Ach, lege das Sodom der sündlichen Glieder,
Wofern es dein Wille, zerstöret darnieder!
Nur schone der Seele und mache sie rein,
Um vor dich ein heiliges Zion zu sein".

Surprisingly, the music is not at all sad but buoyant and joyful – dancelike in its triple meter. Evidently the penitence at the close of the chorale has allowed the poet to move beyond dejection and fear. This surprisingly sudden psychological and emotional shift is rooted in Luther's theology. Althaus explains:

"The lifelong repentance in which the law keeps the Christian is clearly distinguished from the effect of the law without Christ. The death which the law inflicts is now "bearable," and it no longer leads to despair and damnation but to righteousness. The law and its terrors are greatly "moderated" in the context of justification. Thus the Christian's repentance is not unpleasant and difficult as it once was, but easy and joyful; for Christians already have the Spirit"²⁵.

BWV 48/5

In the fifth movement the poet brings us back to the Gospel lesson. Remembering that Jesus turned to the paralytic's physical need after confronting the

24 Robert L. Marshall: *The Compositional Process of J. S. Bach. A Study of the Autograph Scores of the Vocal Works*, Princeton 1972, vol. 1, pp. 76–77. In this connection, it is noteworthy that Leipzig hymn schedules specified the use of penitential hymns for the Sunday in question. See Günther Stiller: *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bowman, Daniel F. Poellot, and Hilton C. Oswald, ed. Robin A. Leaver, St. Louis 1984, pp. 246, 252–253.

25 Althaus (n. 4), p. 269.

spiritual one, he concludes that contemporary believers, too, may hope for physical aid.

“Hier aber tut des Heilands Hand
Auch unter denen Toten Wunder.
Scheint deine Seele gleich erstorben,
Der Leib geschwächt und ganz verdorben,
Doch wird uns Jesu Kraft bekannt.
Er weiß im geistlich Schwachen
Den Leib gesund, die Seele stark zu machen”.

Bach sets this text as a simple tenor secco recitative and moves directly on to the aria (movement 6), where the idea is continued.

BWV 48/6

“Vergibt mir Jesus meine Sünden,
So wird mir Leib und Seel gesund.
Er kann die Toten lebend machen
Und zeigt sich kräftig in den Schwachen,
Er hält den längst geschlossenen Bund,
Daß wir im Glauben Hilfe finden”.

The aria's most striking feature is a rhythmic one, namely, its many hemiolas. From a harmonic standpoint, the primary characteristic (as illustrated immediately by the opening ritornello) is continuous modulation, especially from a minor key to its relative major. These modulations correspond rhetorically with the theological import of the libretto: in a climate of repentance and faith Christ brings about change (resurrection). While the modulations generally move predictably, there are a few surprises. In mm. 50–57 Bach moves from Gm to Am, then in the following instrumental interlude from Am to B♭M (not CM!)²⁶.

²⁶ Two other modulations are also striking: in mm. 80–84 Bach moves from Gm to E♭M; in 98–105 (just prior to the concluding ritornello) he moves from Fm to Gm. In the latter example the arrival of Gm is delayed for four measures by an extended deceptive cadence to Cm (mm. 101–104). Crist argues that the movement features two kinds of ascending modulations, which represent “resurrection”: upward motion through the circle of fifths (Gm – Dm [m. 38] – Am [m. 57]), and an upward, “wrenching” modulation from Am to B♭M (mm. 58–63). While this perspective is attractive, it should be noted that from that point on the music “descends” within the circle of fifths to Cm/E♭M (mm. 67/69, 75/83) and even to Fm (m. 96) before eventually returning to Gm (m. 105).

BWV 48/7

A simple chorale, committing all things to God's divine providence, ends this remarkable cantata. The melody is the same as the one used as instrumental cantus firmus in the opening movement.

With regard to Cantata 48, therefore, we may say that Bach thoughtfully expounds the text's themes of law, repentance and grace, and victory through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Some of his devices are essentially rhetorical – affective use of chromaticism and dissonance, superimposition (and integration) of the chorale, and text-determined modulations; others are evidently symbolic: the use of canon, modulations to “sharp” keys, and perhaps even the use of certain numbers.

BWV 78/4

Let us now briefly return to Cantata 78, which deals with the same theological tenets as BWV 48. A point of turning from despair to peace and joy is also clearly evident in this work. After the anguished tenor recitative described above – whose sentiments allude to Romans 7 and accord exactly with Luther's view on the bondage of the human will – we encounter an abrupt change of mood in the tenor aria. The theme is justification and rejuvenation through Christ's blood: “Das Blut, so meine Schuld durchstreicht, macht mir das Herze wieder leicht und spricht mich frei”. Overt signs of the new spirit include some word-painting (staccato and pizzicato notes apparently symbolizing droplets of blood²⁷), and the 6/8 meter. This aria's position in the cantata as a whole is also significant, for it serves as “keystone” in an arch form²⁸.

BWV 78/5

The hopeful theme is continued in the bass recitative (No. 5), whose accompanying strings remind one of the *Vox Christi*. The text identifies Christ's five signs of victory (“Siegeszeichen”): the wounds, nails, crown [of thorns], grave, and blows of his passion. The singer pauses rhetorically after naming

27 Compare the aria “Blute nur” in the *St. Matthew Passion*.

28 Arch form is itself symbolic when understood as a chiasmic structure. Thus, for example, the symmetrical form A–B–C–D–C–B–A of Cantata 78 can be visualized as:

A	B	C
	D	
C	B	A

each one. The vocal line is disjunct, with the greatest leap (a descending 11th – from d' to Ab) occurring on the word “Grab” (“grave”). The number of distinct pitches employed (excluding octaves) for the *Siegeszeichen* is exactly seven. The mood is abruptly shattered by an orchestral outburst marked *vivace* and *forte* (the vocal part is marked *con ardore*), in which a shaking/hammering figure (a sixteenth note rest followed by four repeated notes – three sixteenths and an eighth) depicts the sudden, terrifying onset of the final judgment. The terror does not last long, however; at the reminder of God’s love the rhythm steadies, and the recitative blossoms into a concluding arioso, prompted, no doubt, by the text, which now quotes the chorale stanza’s final four lines verbatim²⁹. In this arioso Bach hides the corresponding phrases of the chorale tune, now transposed a tone lower.

BWV 78/2

Canonic construction appears in the second movement (the duet, “Wir eilen mit schwachen, doch emsigen Schritten”). Here it is hard to demonstrate any associations with “law”. Dürr’s suggestion, that Bach’s use of canon was probably intended to symbolize Christian discipleship³⁰, is less convincing than Renate Steiger’s view that it depicts the successive scurrying of the lepers “to Christ for healing,” as verbalized in the text³¹. Luther’s commentary on the day’s gospel in the Calov Bible commentary (some of which Bach underlined in his copy), suggests a possible connection with “law”. It centers on Christ’s instructions to the ten lepers: “Go and show yourselves to the priests”³². The biblical context for this command is the procedure specified under Mosaic law: lepers who believed themselves cured had to appear before the priests for a series of cleansing rituals in order to be pronounced clean³³. The Calov

29 This movement is based on stanzas 8–10 of the chorale.

30 See Dürr, *Die Kantaten* (n. 13), p. 586.

31 See Renate Steiger: *Gnadengegenwart. Johann Sebastian Bach im Kontext lutherischer Orthodoxie und Frömmigkeit*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2002 (*Doctrina et Pietas* II/2), “Eine Predigt zum Locus De iustificatione. Die Kantate ‘Jesu, der du meine Seele’ BWV 78”, p. 38.

32 Luke 17:14.

33 Priests were responsible for declaring lepers “unclean” as well as pronouncing them “clean” after healing. See Lev. 13:2, 14:2–3, ff. The section in which Bach’s underlining appears, reads as follows: “They were physically cured of their leprosy, but then fell victim to a spiritual leprosy, which is a thousand times worse. But Christ lets both go; to enjoy His goodness is to

commentary speculates that once the nine “ungrateful” lepers had conversed with the priests and completed the cleansing ceremony, they were persuaded it had been their adherence to the law and their sacrifices that had produced healing, rather than faith in Christ. Thus they had become infected with a spiritual leprosy worse than their original condition³⁴. Although Bach apparently acquired the Calov Bible only after completing this cantata, he was probably acquainted with this interpretation from its appearance elsewhere in Luther’s works (see above). However, there is nothing in the aria’s text to suggest the strictures and burden of the law, and it seems unlikely that Bach would have chosen canonic texture on the basis of a biblical interpretation not reflected in the libretto. In any case, the vocal lines – while canonic – are exuberantly melismatic and the busyness of the continuo line seems more joyous than labored. Clearly, the movement represents an intentional affective contrast to the preceding movement (with its complex texture – lamento bass³⁵, chromatic counterpoint, vigorous motives, and chorale cantus firmus) and to the anguished recitative that follows. While the happy mood may seem incongruous to a modern listener, it is actually in keeping with the contemporaneous exegetical tradition of Lk. 17:13–20 (the latter part of the day’s gospel reading). In Bach’s day sermons for the fourteenth Sunday after Trinity emphasized the certainty of answered prayer for afflicted ones who “raise their voices” to God in the name of Jesus. With passages like Ps. 34:7 (“Da dieser Elende rief, hörte der Herr”), Is. 63:1 (“Ich bin’s [...] ein Meister [...] zu helfen”), and Mt. 1:21 (“[...] des Namen sollst du Jesus heißen; denn er wird sein Volk selig machen von ihren Sünden”) they encouraged listeners to wait in joyful anticipation for a positive answer to their cry for help. Bach’s musical setting, with its rising figures depicting “voices raised in prayer to Jesus”, on the one hand, and its joyous affect (parallel thirds and sixths, buoyant rhythms) depicting the anticipated answer, on the other, is thus very much in line with contemporary exegetical tradition³⁶.

remain silent on matters of justice and to exchange hate and disfavor for praise and thanks, so that one may learn from this that at times we ask for that which had better not be granted to us [...]”.

34 Howard H. Cox: The Calov Bible of J. S. Bach, Ann Arbor 1985, facsimile 242; translation of the passage underlined by Bach on p. 448.

35 The descending chromatic tetrachord (often referred to as a *passus duriusculus*) was traditionally used as a symbol of lament. See Ellen Rosand: The Descending Tetrachord: an Emblem of Lament, in: Musical Quarterly 65 (1979), pp. 346–359.

36 I am indebted here to Renate Steiger’s detailed discussion of BWV 78/2 in *Gnadengegenwart* (n. 31), pp. 38–44.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe the patterns of invention in both of these cantatas demonstrate Bach's keen awareness of biblical and theological matters, and his desire to represent these in symbolic ways. In particular, these cantatas show Bach's treatment of several principal articles in Luther's theological system: the doctrine of original sin and the doctrines pertaining to the relationship between law and gospel (in particular, the doctrine of justification by faith alone), all of which find their primary bases in the book of Romans. More importantly, these cantatas show Bach's unparalleled ingenuity in generating musical invention from these theological themes.
