J.S. Bach - Church Cantatas BWV 135

Introduction & updates at melvinunger.com.

Form: Chorale Fantasia-Recit (T)-Aria (T)-Recit (A)-Aria (B)-Chorale.

The Gospel reading ends: "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents," and this becomes the primary theme of the cantata. The cantata also references the idea of reversal mentioned in the Epistle: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you...And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you" (1 Pet. 5:10). Thus "the last become first" (see movement 1).

NBA I/16; BC A100
3. S. after Trinity (BWV 21, 135)
*1 Pet. 5:6–11 (Cast all your cares on God)
*Lk. 15:1–10 (Parable of the lost sheep and lost coin)
Librettist: Unknown
FP: 25 June 1724 (St. Thomas)

J.S. Bach

This cantata is highly unified, where material is often derived from the chorale tune.

Cantata No. 135

Ach Herr, mich armen Sünder

Instrumentation:
Cornetto
Tbn
Ob I, II
Vln I, II
Vla
SATB
Continuo with Trombone
(Cornetto added to double Soprano in final chorale.)

135/1. **1. Coro** (Chorale1 Vs. 1 verbatim)

•Prayer for mercy on this poor sinner (135/1).

(This chorale loosely paraphrases Psalm 6.)

1. Ritornello Oboes

Strings

Counterpoint derived from the opening of the chorale tune, so this work differs from the concertante type where instruments have independent material. See Dürr/Jones 414.

E minor

D minor

Bassetto texture can symbolize
-incomprehensible realities
-lack of firm oundation
For examples, see side note.

Bassetto Texture (no Continuo bass) in ritornello sections alternates with vocal sections where the chorale tune is in the Bass and Continuo, resulting in quasi-antiphonal or responsorial contrast.

5

A minor D minor G major C major

10

A minor

For chorales in bar form (AAB), Bach sometimes repeats the music for the second chorale line. Here he modifies the music for the second pair of chorale lines by changing the order of entries from TAS-SAT (up-down) to SAT-TAS (down-up), perhaps to differentiate statements that are directed upwards from those that have a downward direction. Alternatively, he may be alluding to Jesus' words, "The first will be last and the last, first" (e.g., Matt. 20:16, Mark 10:31, Luke 13:30).

14 A

Soprano: Ach Herr, mich ar- men Sün - der, Herr, mich

Counterpoint is based on the chorale phrase. The ascending order of entries reflects the upwardly directed supplication.

Alto: Ach Herr, mich ar - - - - men Sün - der, ach Herr, mich

Chorale stanza 1 alludes to Psalm 6:1.

Tenore: Ach Herr, mich ar - - - - men Sün - der, ach Herr, mich ar - men

(Mel: „Herzlich thut mich verlangen")

Basso: Ach Herr, mich ar - men Sün - - - der

Tune now is now in Bass. Bach's began his chorale cycle systematically:
BWV 20:Soprano
BWV 2: Alto
BWV 7: Tenor
BWV 135: Bass
(See side note.)
BWV 3 also puts the chorale in the bass voice.

A Chorale Phrase 1.

Oboes tacet

In the vocal sections, the oboes drop out at first while the strings mostly double the voices. The oboes sometimes enter again for emphasis in 6-part texture (e.g., at the end).

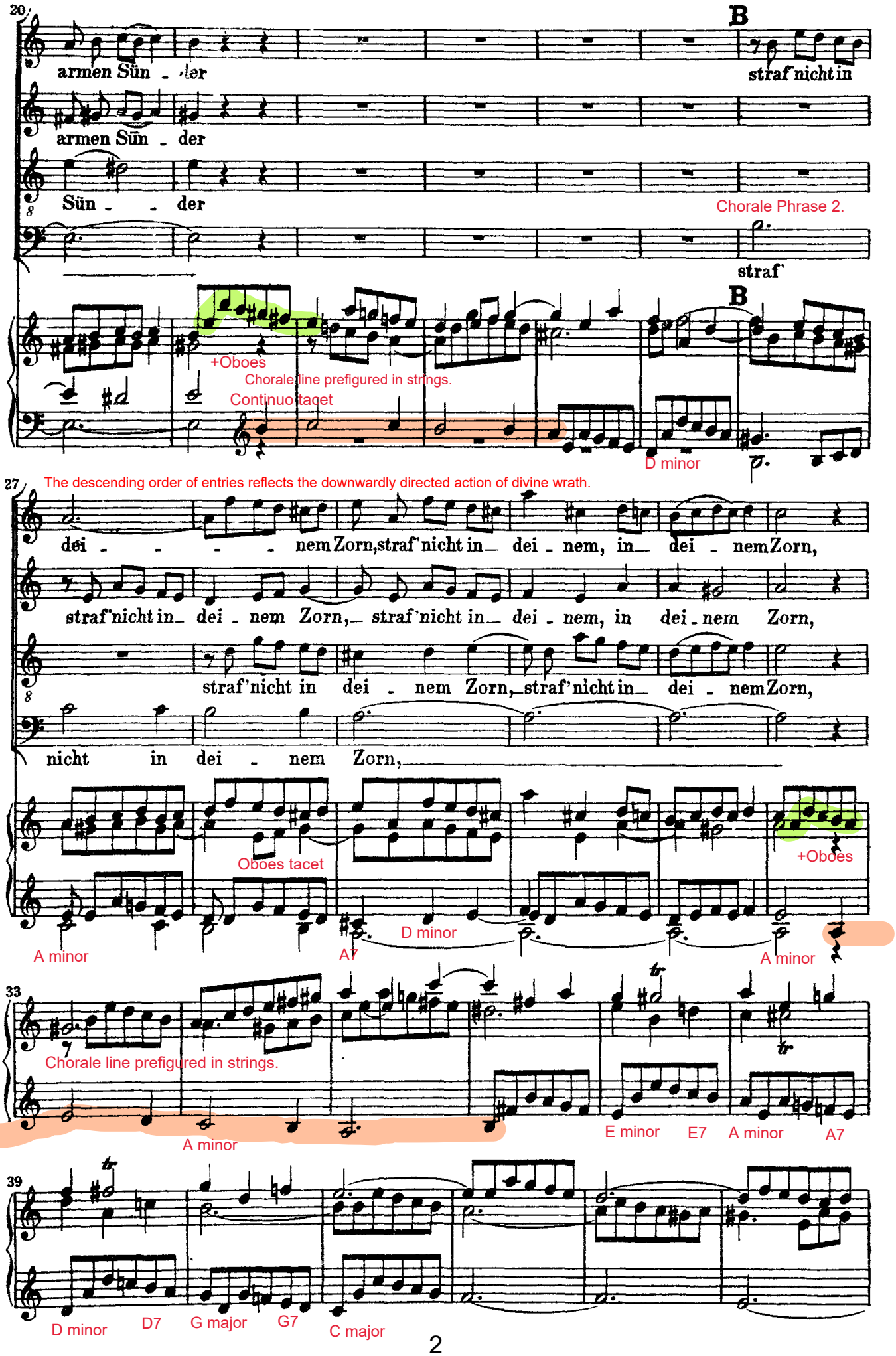
+ Continuo

The inclusion of trombone in the continuo group may symbolize judgment.

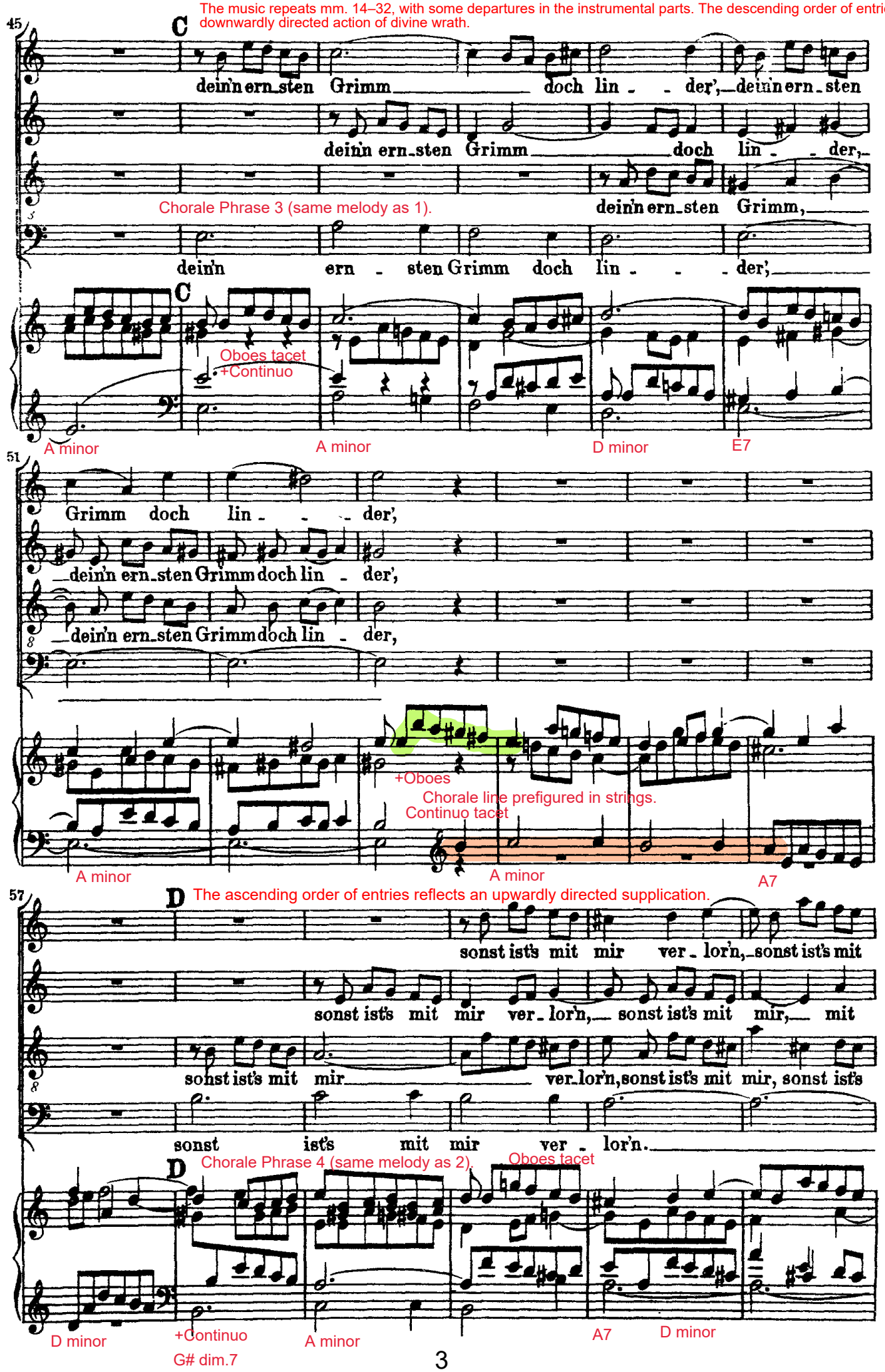
A minor

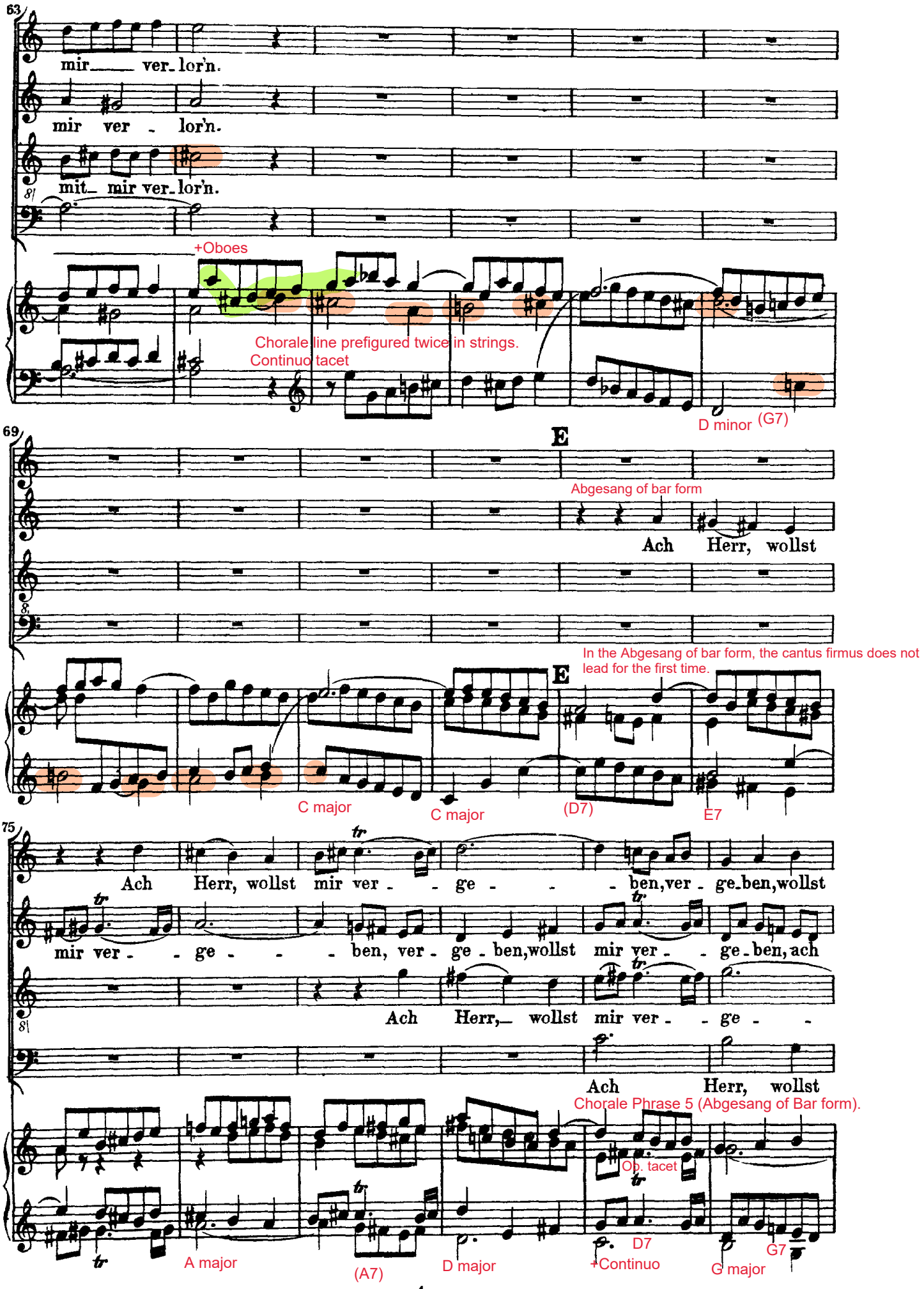
A minor

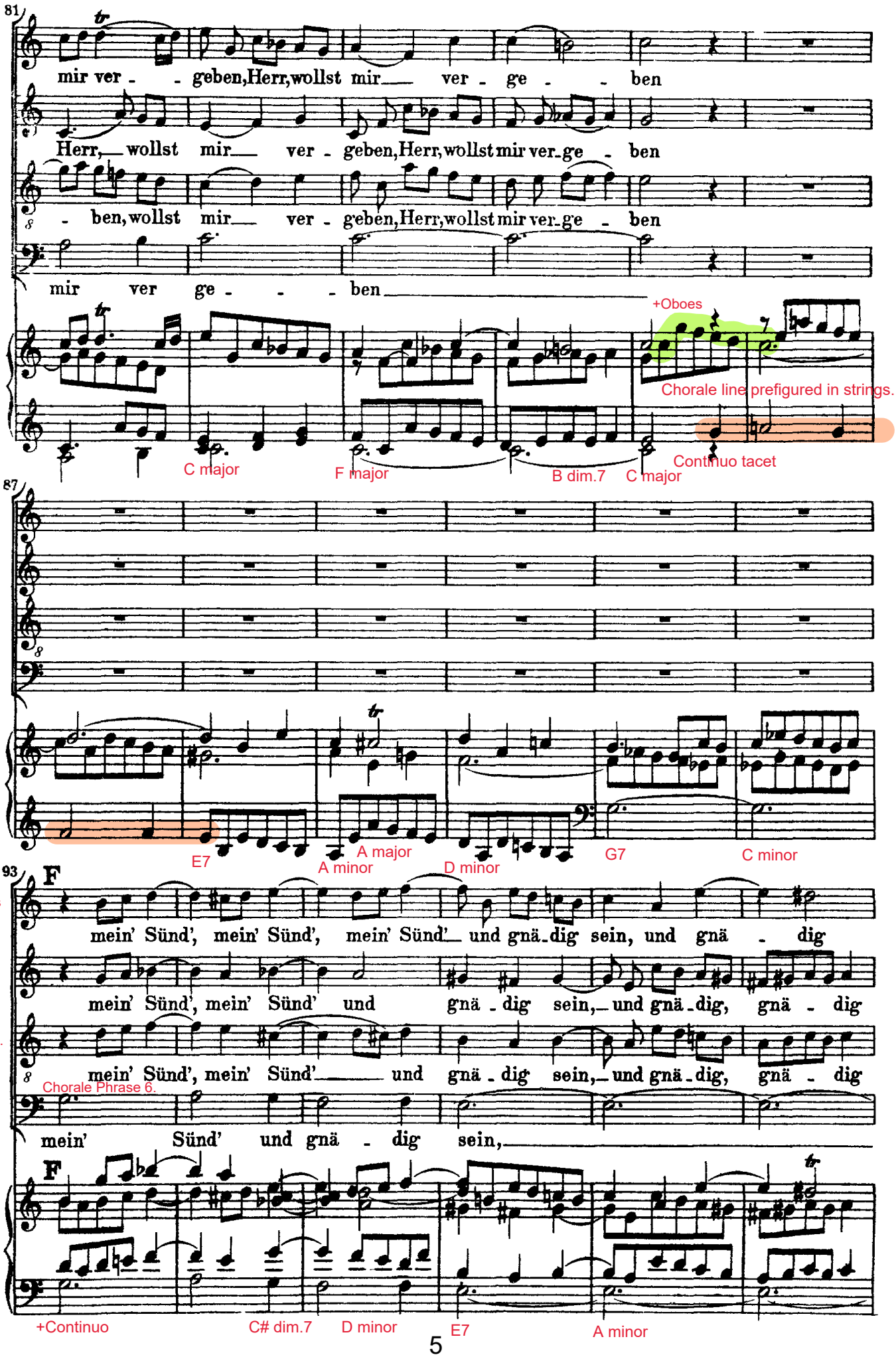
Bach harmonized this chorale tune in different ways. For example, see BWV 25/1, composed a year earlier for the 14th S. after Trinity, 29 August 1723. Here he begins and ends on the dominant.


20
armen Sün - der
armen Sün - der
Sün - - der
B
straf nicht in
Chorale Phrase 2.
straf'
B
+Oboes
Chorale line prefigured in strings.
Continuo tacet
D minor
27
The descending order of entries reflects the downwardly directed action of divine wrath.
dei - - - - nem Zorn, straf' nicht in dei - nem, in dei - nem Zorn,
straf' nicht in dei - nem Zorn, straf' nicht in dei - nem, in dei - nem Zorn,
straf' nicht in dei - nem Zorn, straf' nicht in dei - nem Zorn,
nicht in dei - nem Zorn,
Oboes tacet
+Oboes
A minor
A7
D minor
A minor
33
Chorale line prefigured in strings.
A minor
E minor
E7
A minor
A7
39
D minor
D7
G major
G7
C major

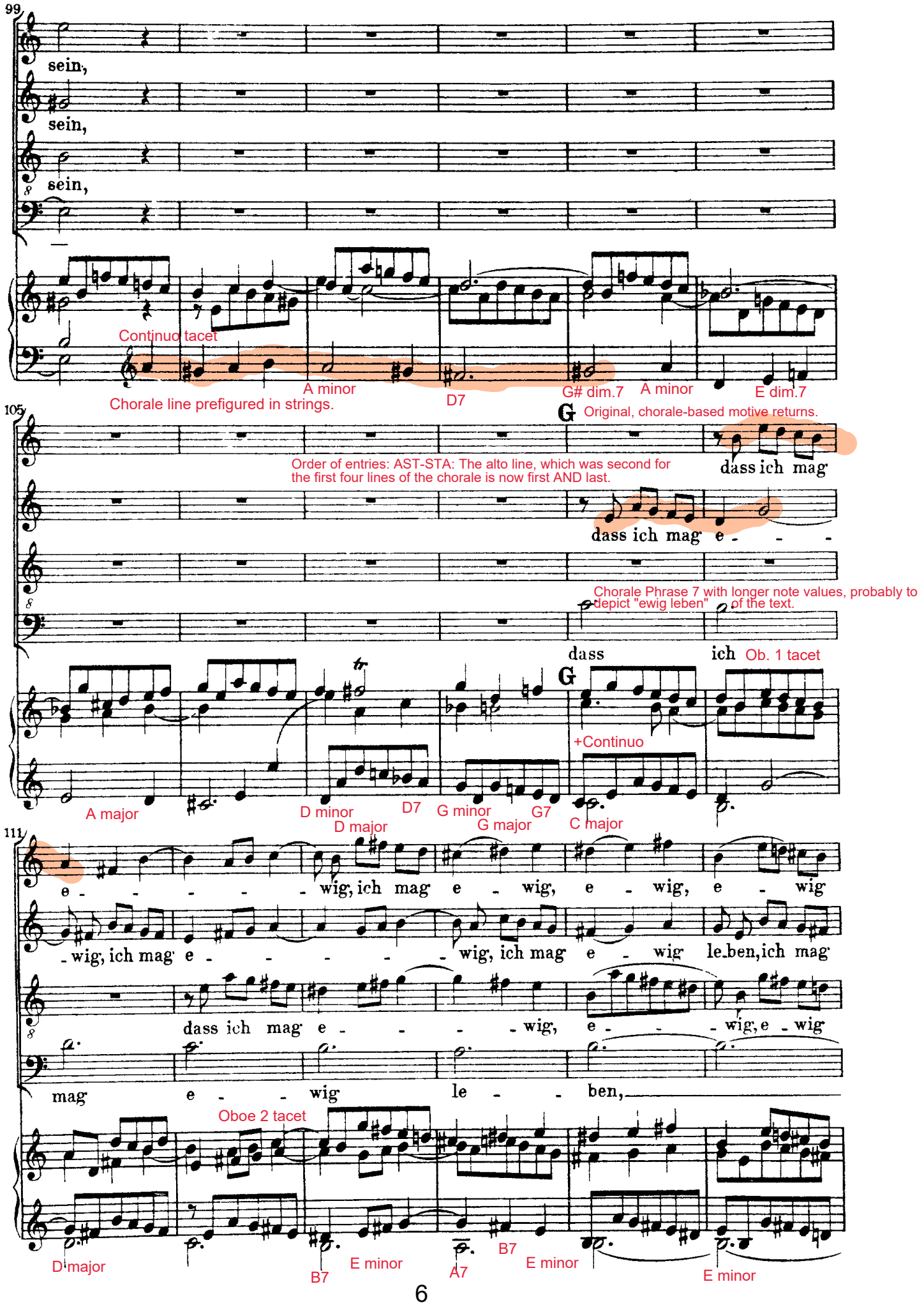
The music repeats mm. 14–32, with some departures in the instrumental parts. The descending order of entries reflects the downwardly directed action of divine wrath.

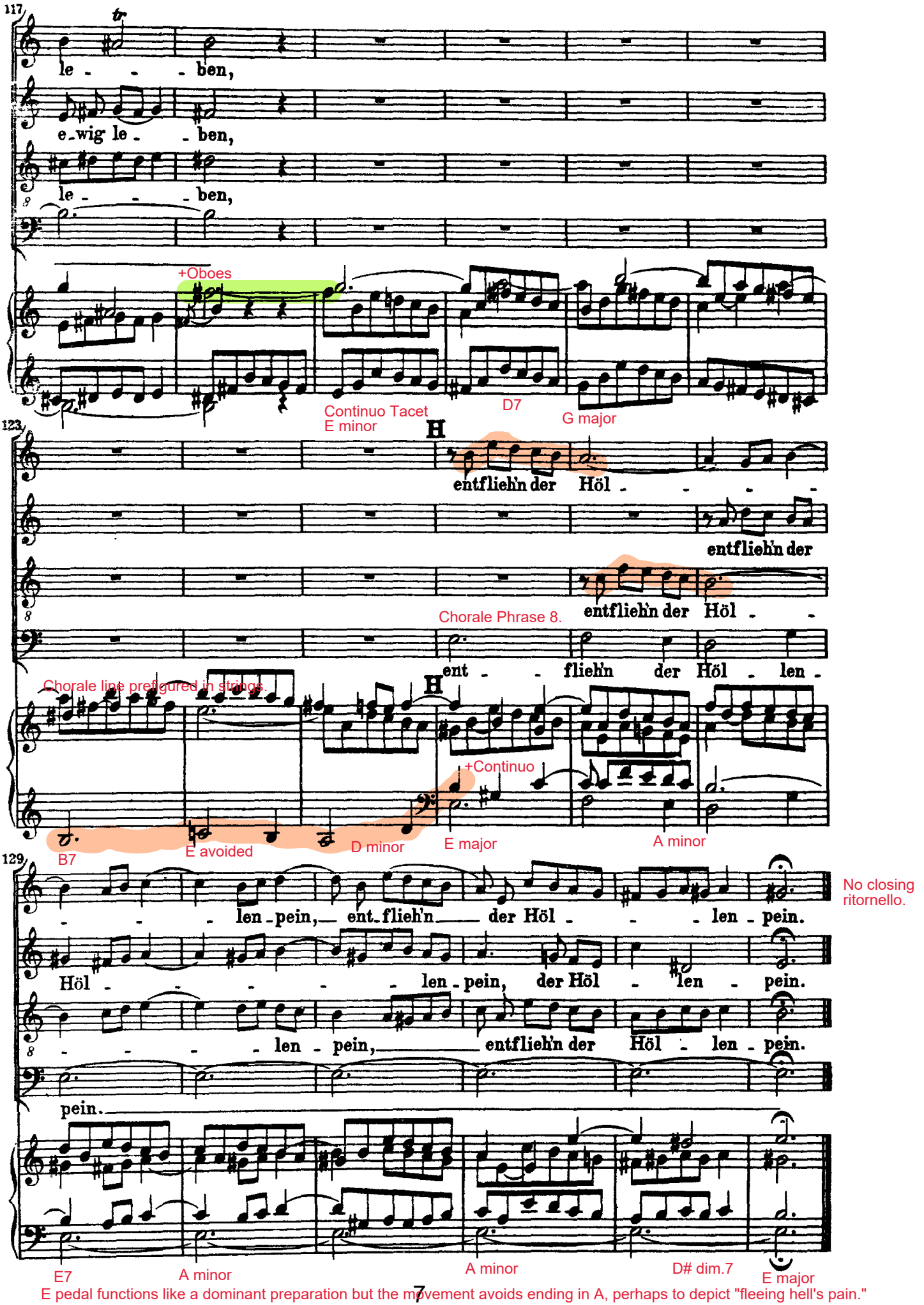



63
mir ver lor'n.
mir ver - lor'n.
mit mir ver lor'n.
+Oboes
Chorale line prefigured twice in strings.
Continuo tacet
D minor (G7)
69
E
Abgesang of bar form
Ach Herr, wollst
E
In the Abgesang of bar form, the cantus firmus does not lead for the first time.
C major
C major
(D7)
E7
75
Ach Herr, wollst mir ver - ge - ben, ver - ge - ben, wollst
mir ver - ge - ben, ver - ge - ben, wollst mir ver - ge - ben, ach
Ach Herr, wollst mir ver - ge -
Ach Herr, wollst
Chorale Phrase 5 (Abgesang of Bar form).
Ob. tacet
A major
(A7)
D major
D7
+Continuo
G major
G7



These words are set homophonically rather than in imitation, perhaps to make them very clear: no voice is first or last.


99
sein,
sein,
sein,
Continuo tacet
Chorale line prefigured in strings.
A minor
D7
G# dim.7
A minor
E dim.7
105
G
Original, chorale-based motive returns.
Order of entries: AST-STA: The alto line, which was second for the first four lines of the chorale is now first AND last.
dass ich mag
dass ich mag e - - -
Chorale Phrase 7 with longer note values, probably to depict "ewig leben" of the text.
dass
ich
Ob. 1 tacet
G
+Continuo
A major
D minor
D7
G minor
G7
C major
D major
G major
111
e - - - - - wig, ich mag e - wig, e - wig, e - wig
- wig, ich mag e - - - - - wig, ich mag e - wig le-ben, ich mag
dass ich mag e - - - - wig, e - - - wig, e - wig
mag e - - wig le - - ben,
Oboe 2 tacet
D major
B7
E minor
A7
B7
E minor
E minor



E pedal functions like a dominant preparation but the movement avoids ending in A, perhaps to depict "fleeing hell's pain."

135/2 **2. Recitativo** Secco

(Based on Chorale Vs. 2, alludes to Psalm 6:2–3.)
•Healing sought from physician of souls (135/2).

Text painting: Chromaticism, chromatic saturation for human misery/spiritual sickness.

Chromatic saturation in the vocal part in 5 mm.

Tenore: Ach hei-le mich, du Arzt der See-len, ich bin sehr krank und

Continuo

Text painting: Descending diminished triad in voice for plea for spiritual healing at beginning and end (framing the recitative).

A7 D minor

schwach; man möchte die Ge-bei-ne zäh-len, so jämmerlich hat mich mein Un-gemach, mein

E7 A7 D# dim. B major

Kreuz und Leiden zu-ge-richt't. Das An-gesicht ist ganz von Thränen aufgeschwollen, die,

A# dim.7 B7 E minor C# dim.7 A7

Text painting: 32nd notes for rushing torrents (of tears).

Text painting: downward scale for tears running down.

schnel - - - - lenFluthen gleich, von Wan-gen ab-wärts rol-len. Der

F# dim.7 G7 C minor

Text painting: Shiver figure for "terror," chromaticism to indicate fear.

See-le ist vor Schrek - ken angst und ban-ge; ach, du Herr, wie so lan-ge?

Chorale text line verbatim

Descending diminished triad in voice as at beginning.

A dim.7 F7 G major C major

Rhyme Scheme: ABABCDCD
Bach divides this into 3 sections: ABAB-CD-CD

(Based on Chorale Vs. 3, alludes to Psalm 6:4–5.)

135/3 **3. Aria** •Comfort sought; how can God be praised in death? (135/3).

Ritornello Aria with opening motive based on vocal motive.

Triple meter, song-like melody, and oboe accompaniment suggest a dance. See Dürr/Jones, 415.

Ob. I, II
Continuo

mf Ritornello

C major (Bach often uses C for Christ).

The mood is comforting, as if the prayer has already been answered.

5

G major G major

8

11

G7 C major

14

G major

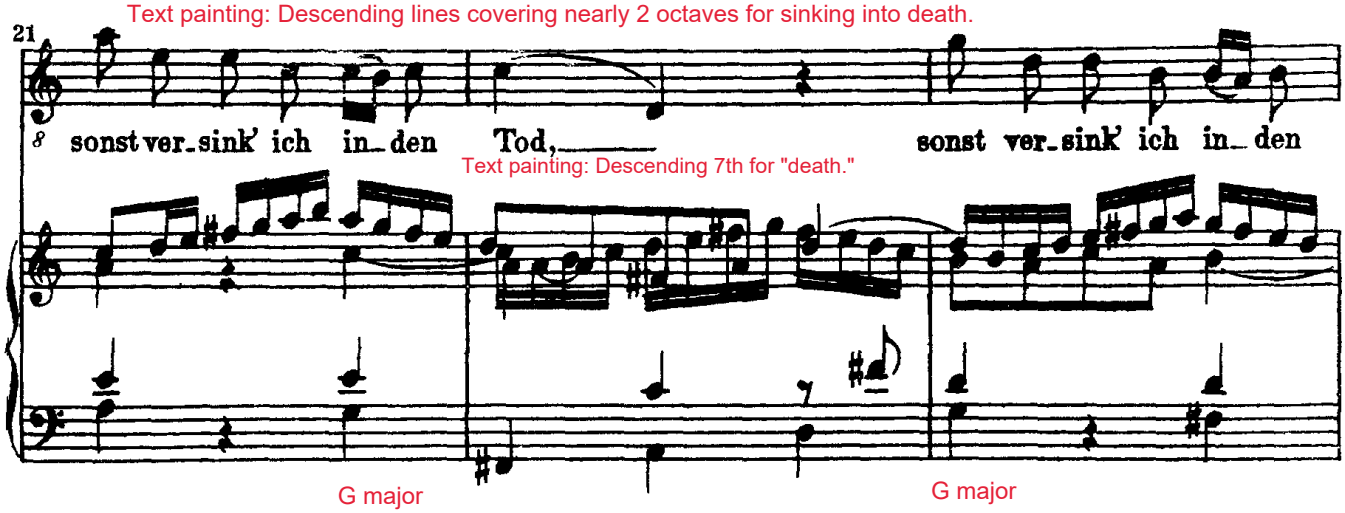
17 **Tenore**

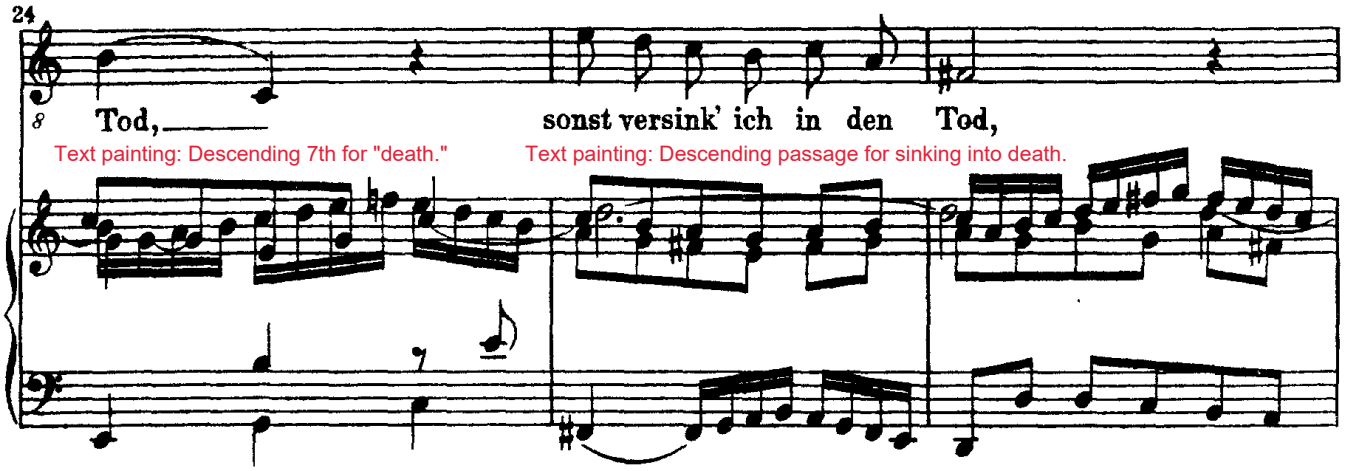
Trö - ste mir, Je - su, mein Ge - mü - the,

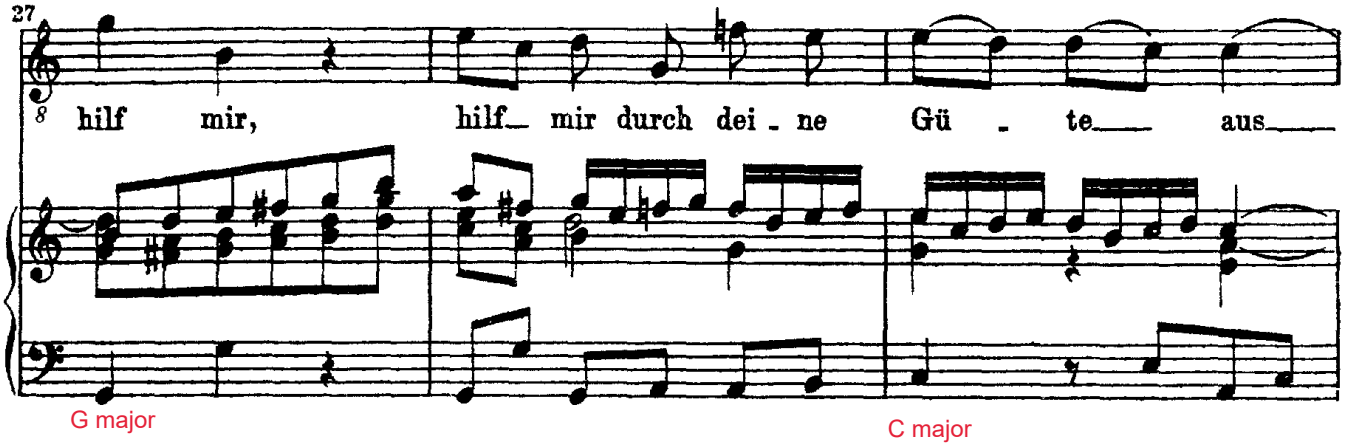
p

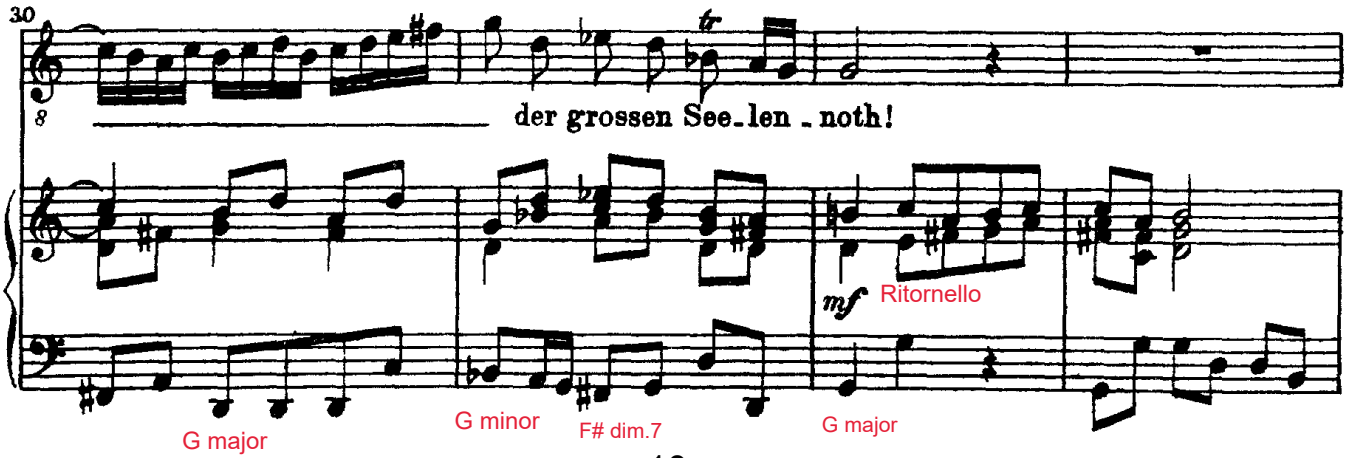
C major

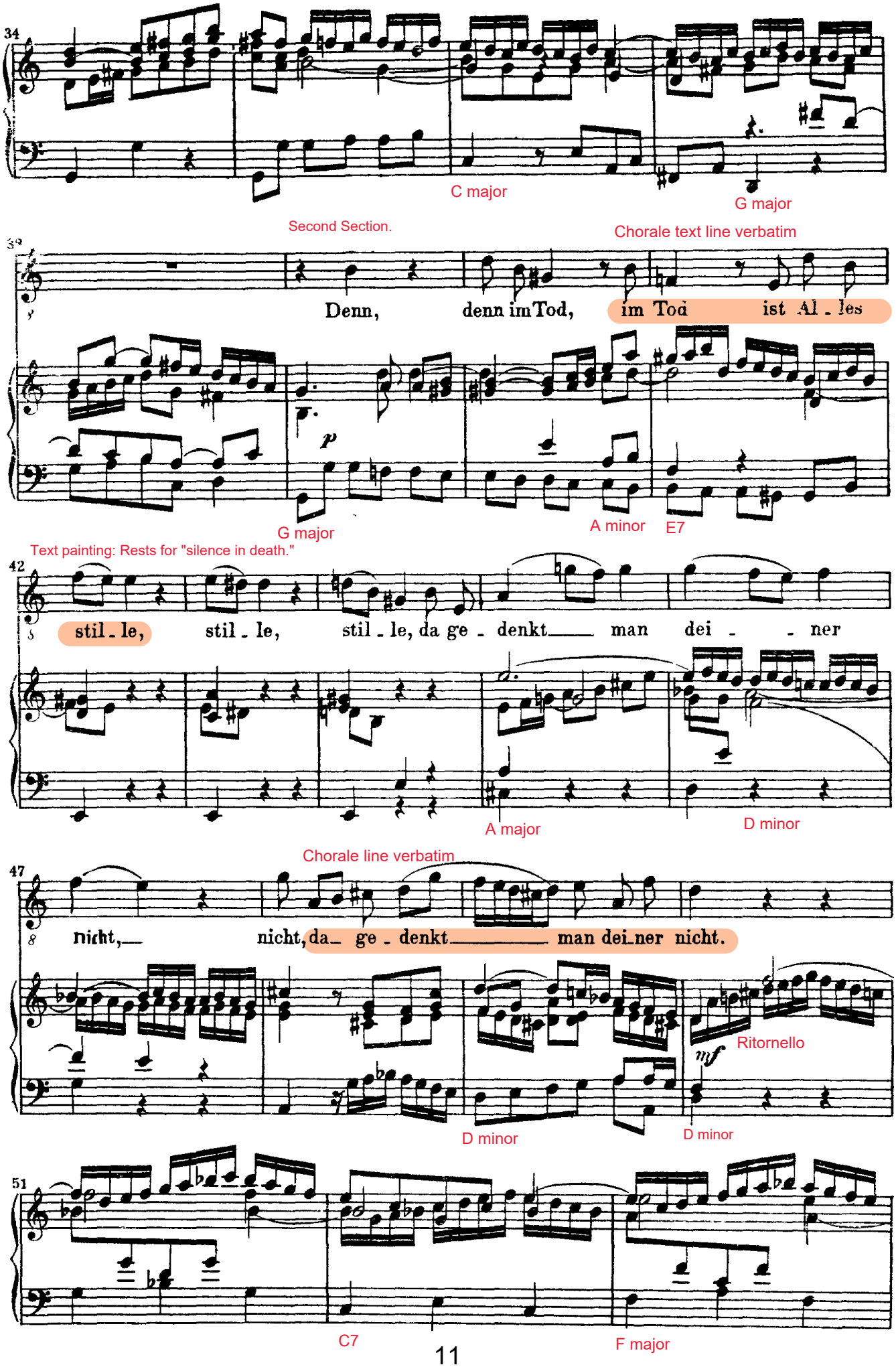
Text painting: Descending lines covering nearly 2 octaves for sinking into death.

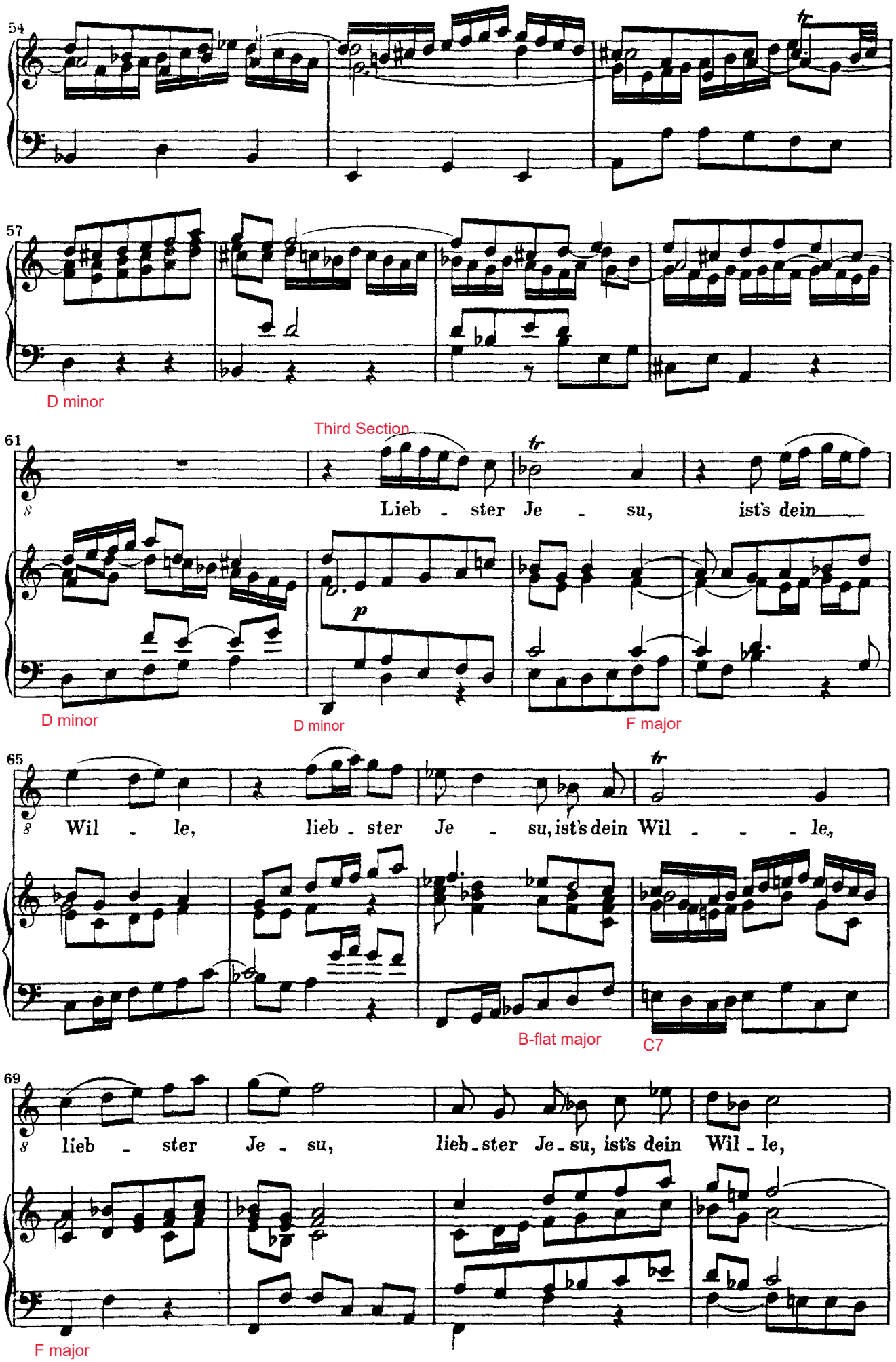


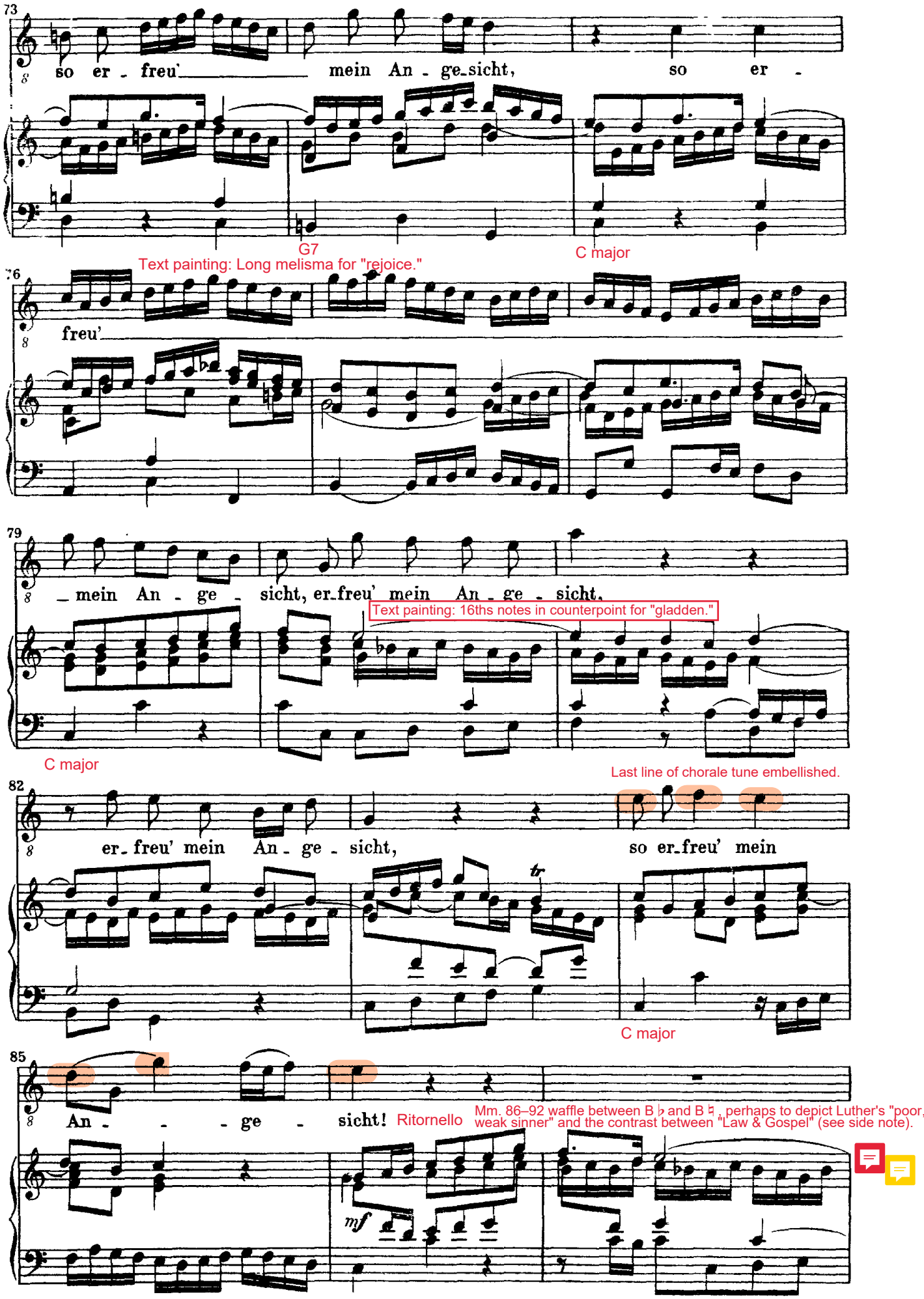


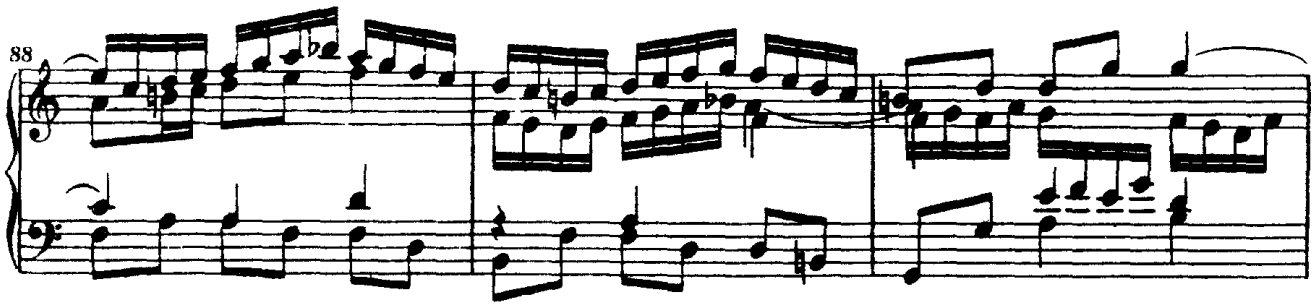


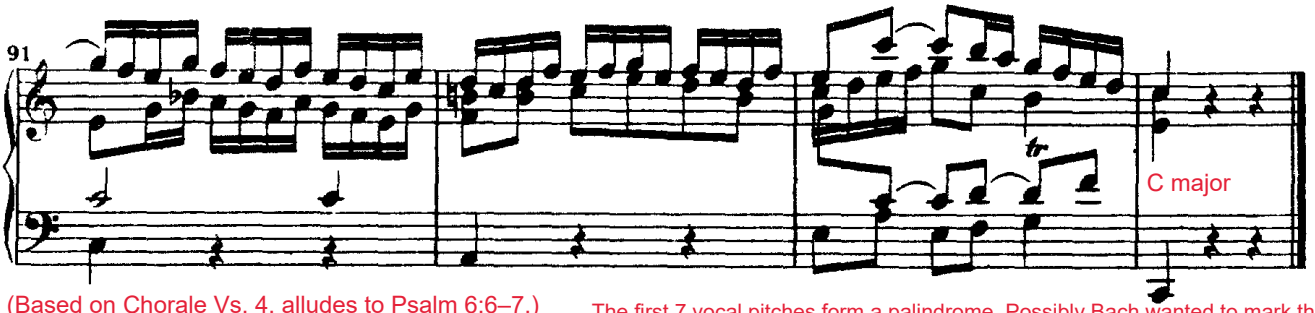



34
C major
G major
Second Section.
Chorale text line verbatim
39
Denn, denn im Tod, im Tod ist Al - les
p
G major
A minor
E7
Text painting: Rests for "silence in death."
42
stil - le, stil - le, stil - le, da ge - denkt man dei - - ner
A major
D minor
Chorale line verbatim
47
nicht, nicht, da ge - denkt man dei ner nicht.
Ritornello
mf
D minor
D minor
51
C7
F major


54
57
D minor
Third Section
61
Lieb - ster Je - su, ist's dein
D minor
D minor
F major
65
Wil - le, lieb - ster Je - su, ist's dein Wil - - - le,
B-flat major
C7
69
lieb - ster Je - su, lieb - ster Je - su, ist's dein Wil - le,
F major


73
so er - freu' mein An - ge-sicht, so er -
G7
C major
Text painting: Long melisma for "rejoice."
76
freu'
79
mein An - ge - sicht, er-freu' mein An - ge - sicht.
Text painting: 16ths notes in counterpoint for "gladden."
C major
Last line of chorale tune embellished.
82
er-freu' mein An - ge - sicht, so er-freu' mein
C major
85
An - - - ge - sicht!
Ritornello
Mm. 86–92 waffle between B ♭ and B ♮, perhaps to depict Luther's "poor, weak sinner" and the contrast between "Law & Gospel" (see side note).
mf



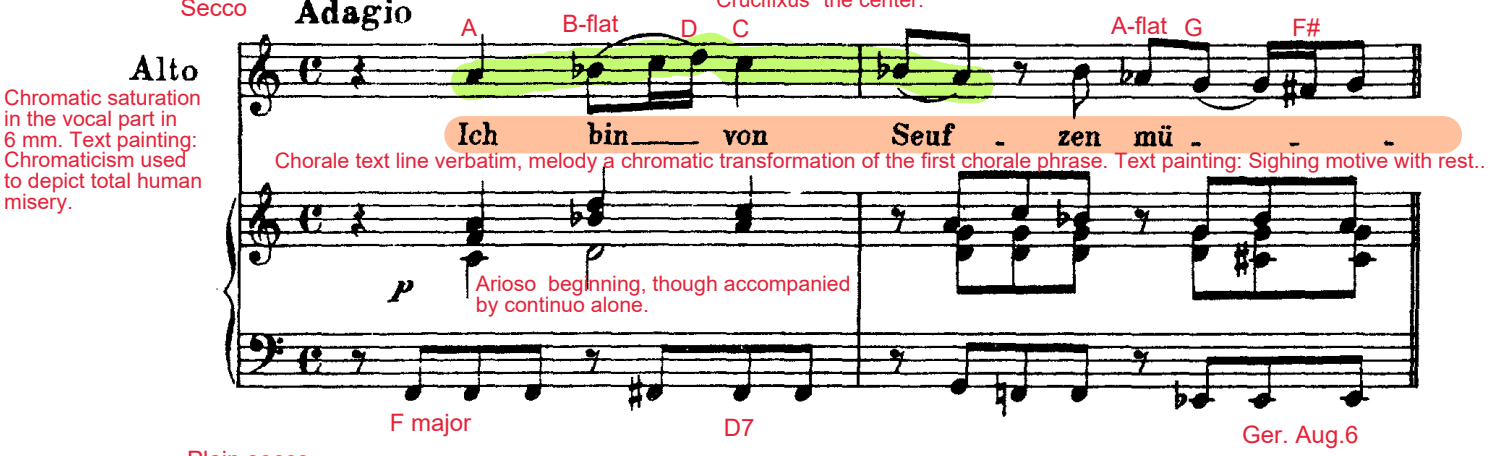


(Based on Chorale Vs. 4, alludes to Psalm 6:6–7.)
●Grief & suffering has sapped all my strength (135/4).

The first 7 vocal pitches form a palindrome. Possibly Bach wanted to mark the center of an arch form where there is no central movement. Compare the "Et resurrexit" palindrome in the B-Minor Mass, which marked the center of a chiastic form before Bach modified the structure (by creating an additional movement for the "Et incarnatus") and made the "Crucifixus" the center.

135/4. **4. Recitativo**

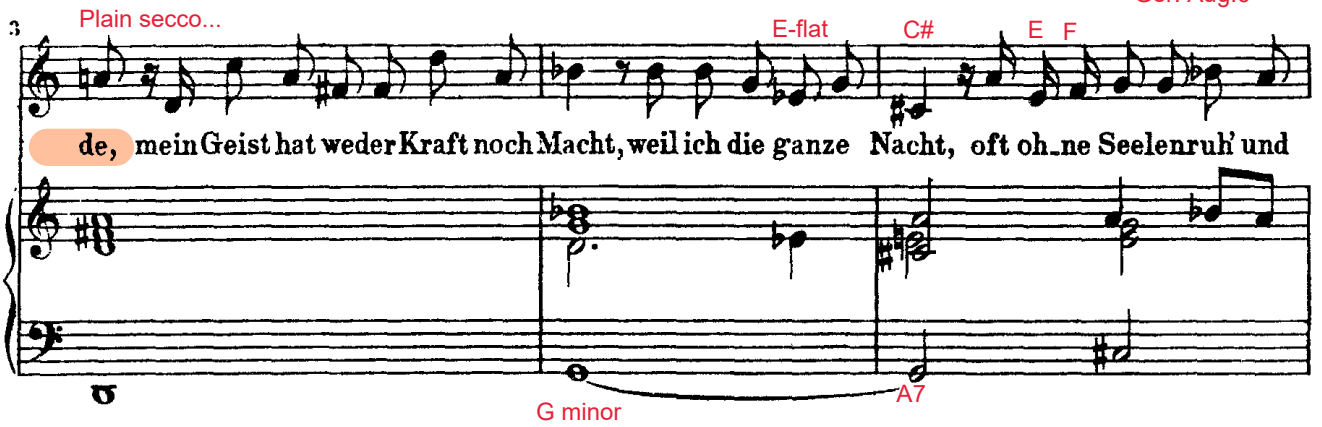
Secco **Adagio**

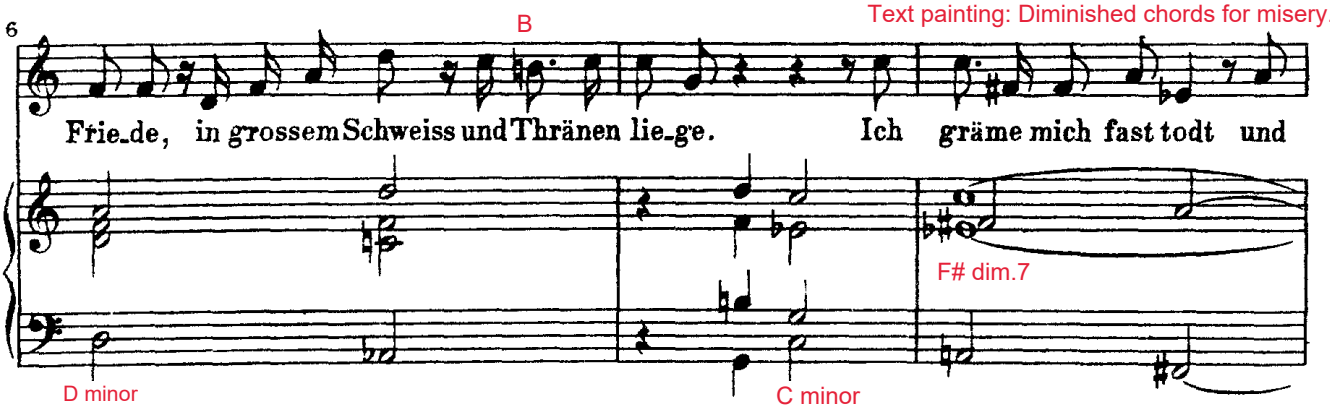


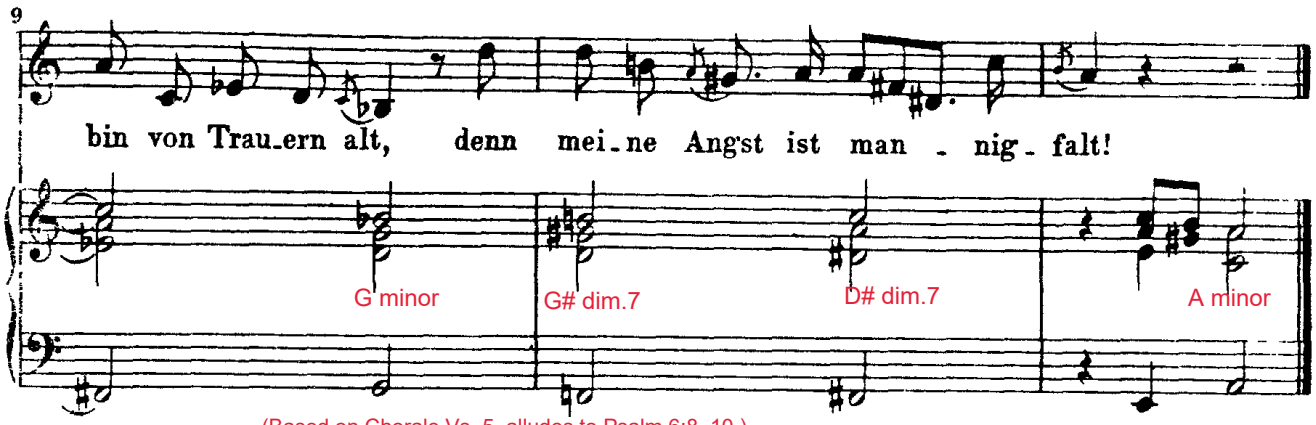
Chromatic saturation in the vocal part in 6 mm. Text painting: Chromaticism used to depict total human misery.

Chorale text line verbatim, melody a chromatic transformation of the first chorale phrase. Text painting: Sighing motive with rest..

Arioso beginning, though accompanied by continuo alone.







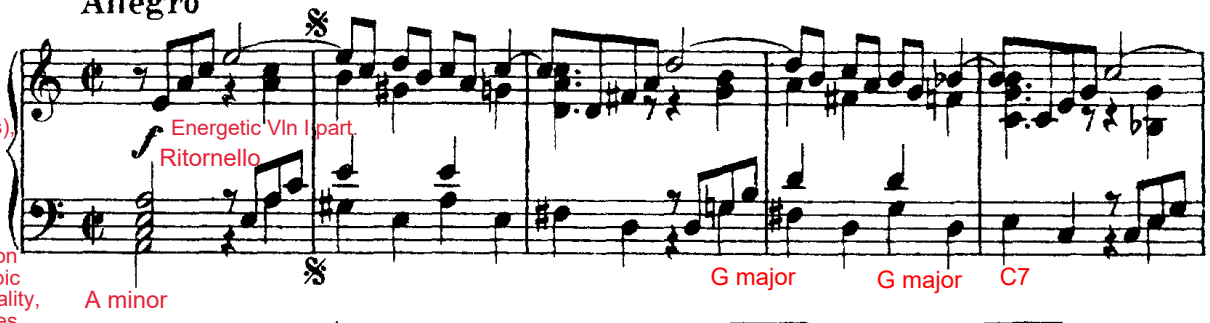
(Based on Chorale Vs. 5, alludes to Psalm 6:8–10.)

135/5. **5. Aria**

Allegro

- Suffering passes; Jesus comforts; foe is dispersed (135/5). This movements relates to the Epistle reading, specifically to the idea of reversal noted in 1 Peter 5:5b–6: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you.

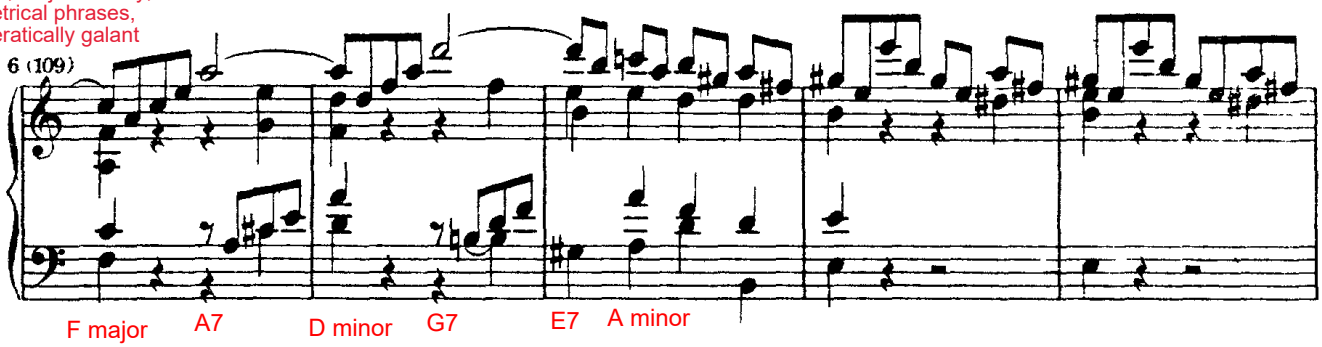
Energetic rhythms (including syncopations), leaps (combined with fast notes in Vln I), and syllabic declamation (except for some melismas on important words) depict aggression against foes. The syllabic declamation, major tonality, and symmetrical phrases, make it operatically galant in style.

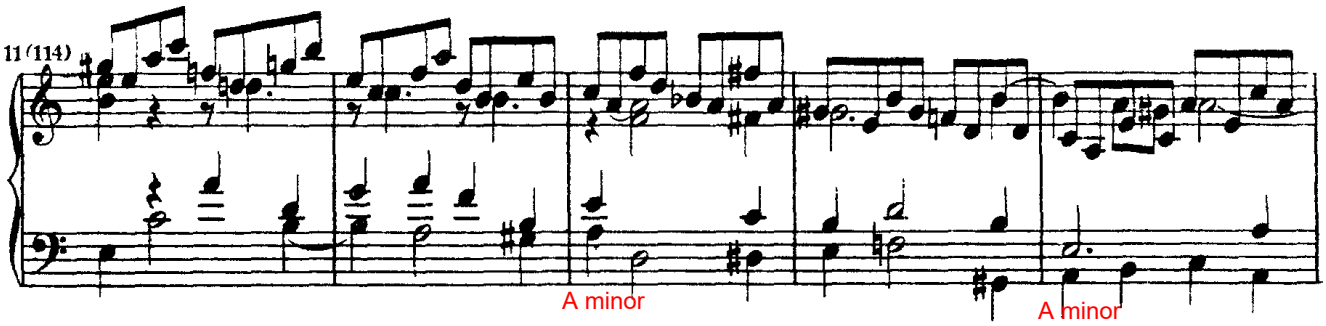


Rhyme Scheme ABCCBDD

Bach's form: Rit-AB-Rit-CC-Rit-BDD AB-Rit

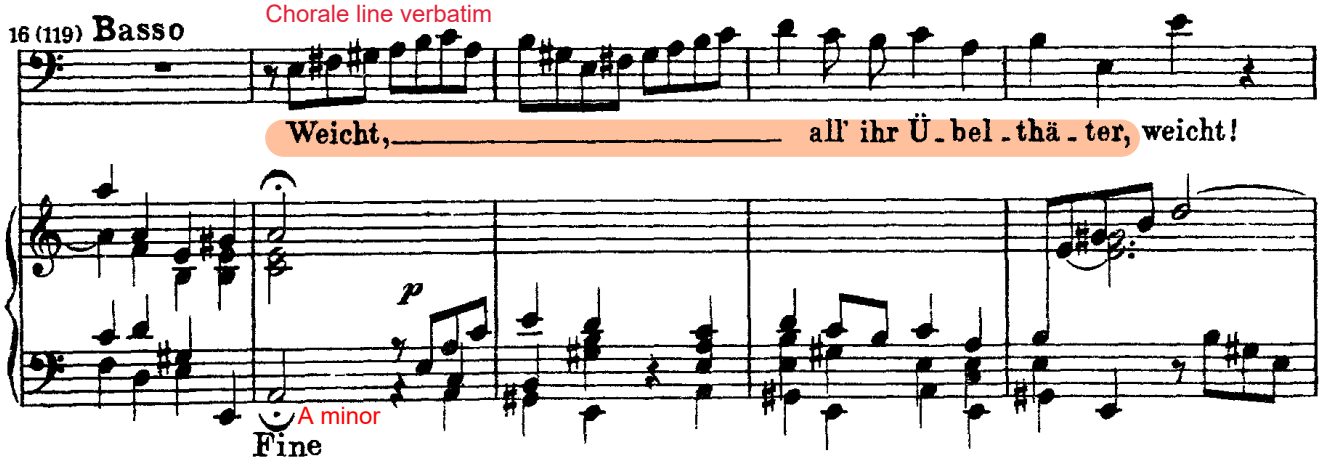
Thus, the movement begins and ends with the command for evil-doers to depart.

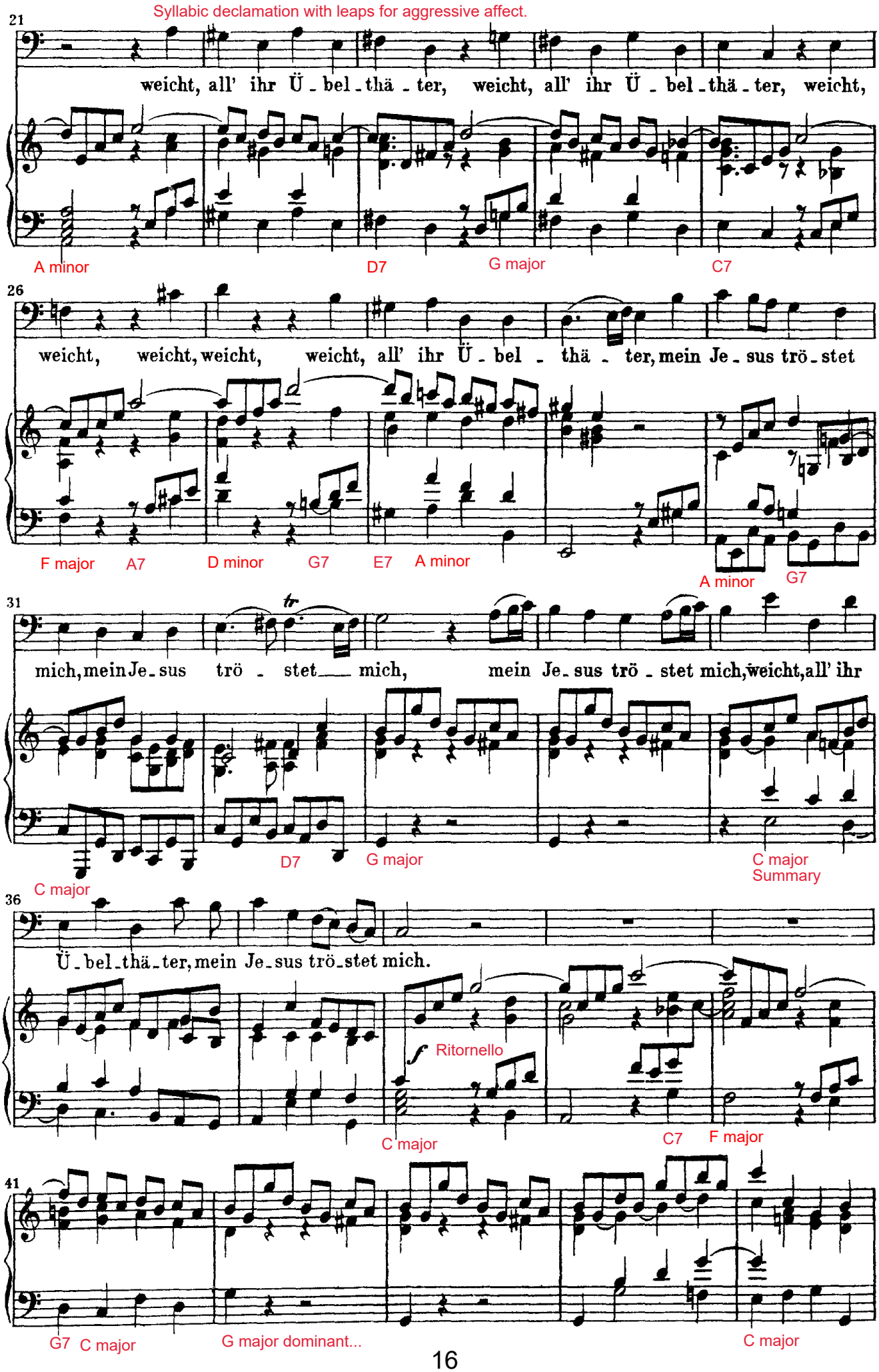


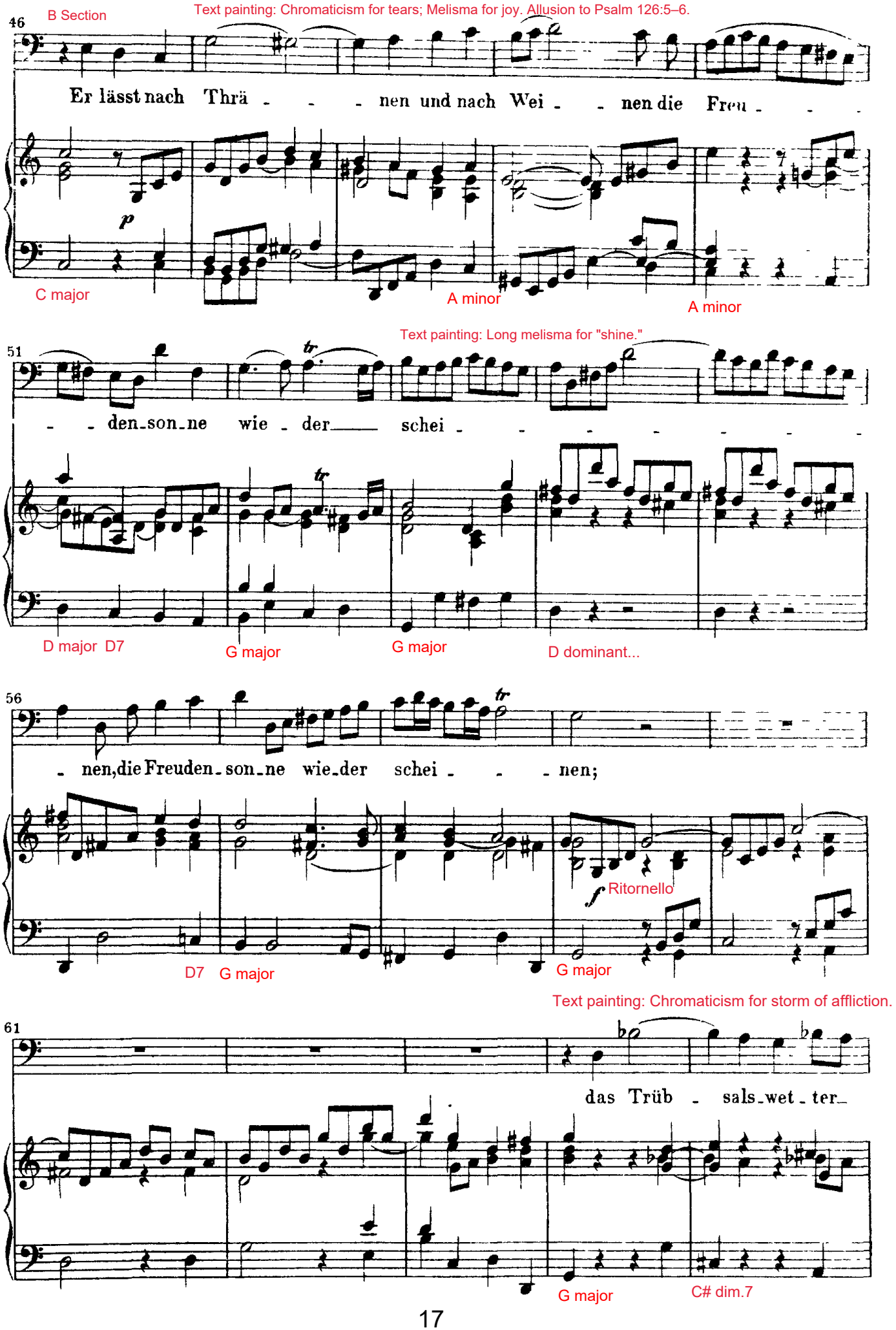


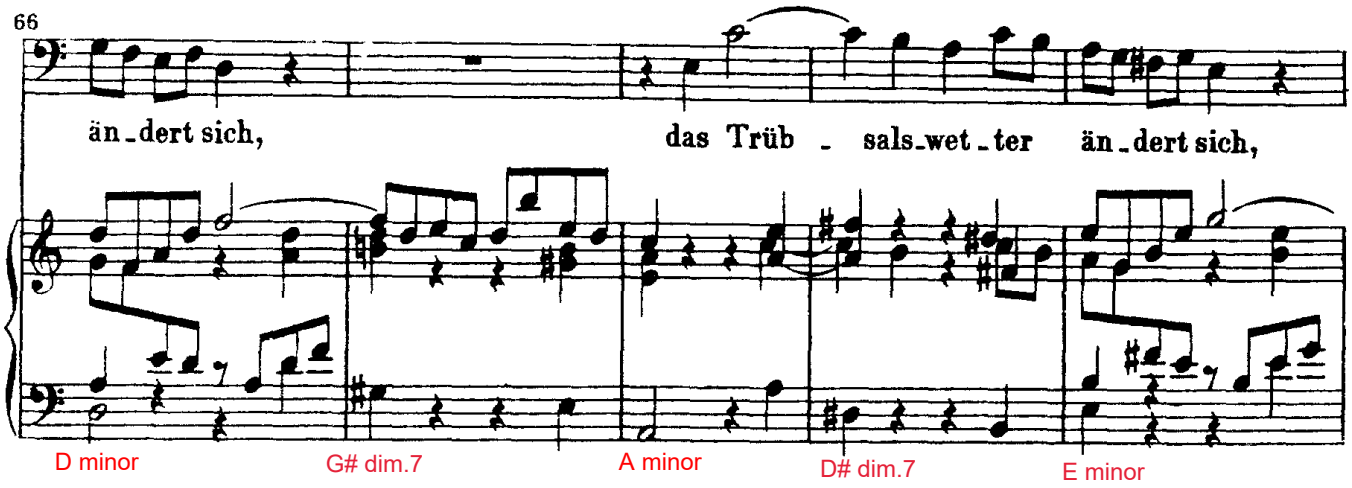
Text painting: Voice begins with fast melisma for aggressive command to depart.

Chorale line verbatim

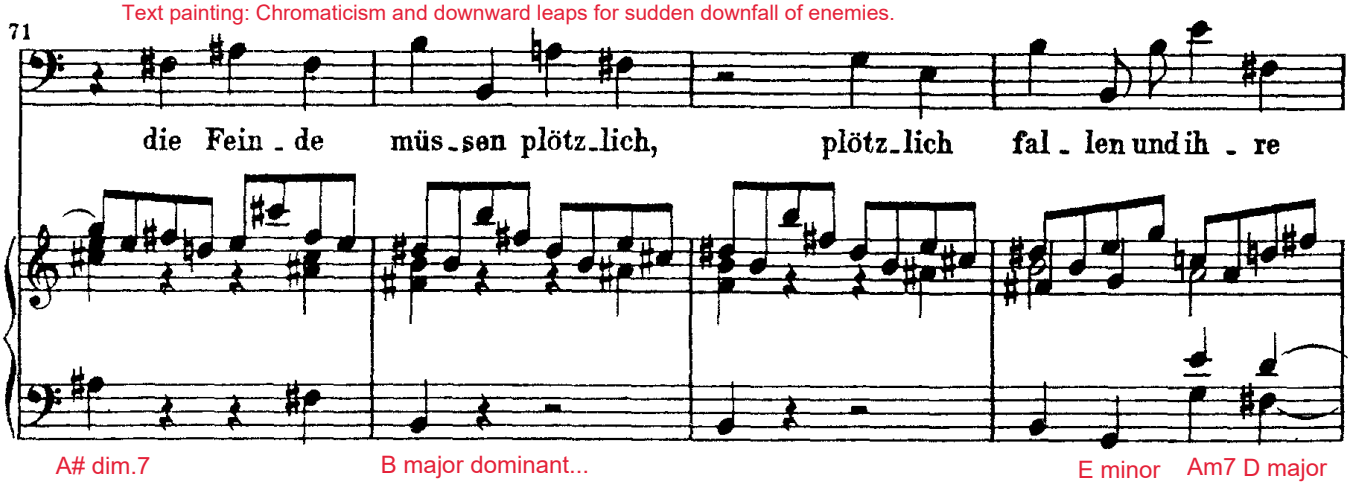



Syllabic declamation with leaps for aggressive affect.
21
weicht, all' ihr Ü - bel - thä - ter, weicht, all' ihr Ü - bel - thä - ter, weicht,
A minor
D7
G major
C7
26
weicht, weicht, weicht, weicht, all' ihr Ü - bel - thä - ter, mein Je - sus trö - stet
F major
A7
D minor
G7
E7
A minor
A minor
G7
31
mich, mein Je - sus trö - stet mich, mein Je - sus trö - stet mich, weicht, all' ihr
C major
D7
G major
C major
Summary
36
Ü - bel - thä - ter, mein Je - sus trö - stet mich.
f Ritornello
C major
C7
F major
41
G7
C major
G major dominant...
C major

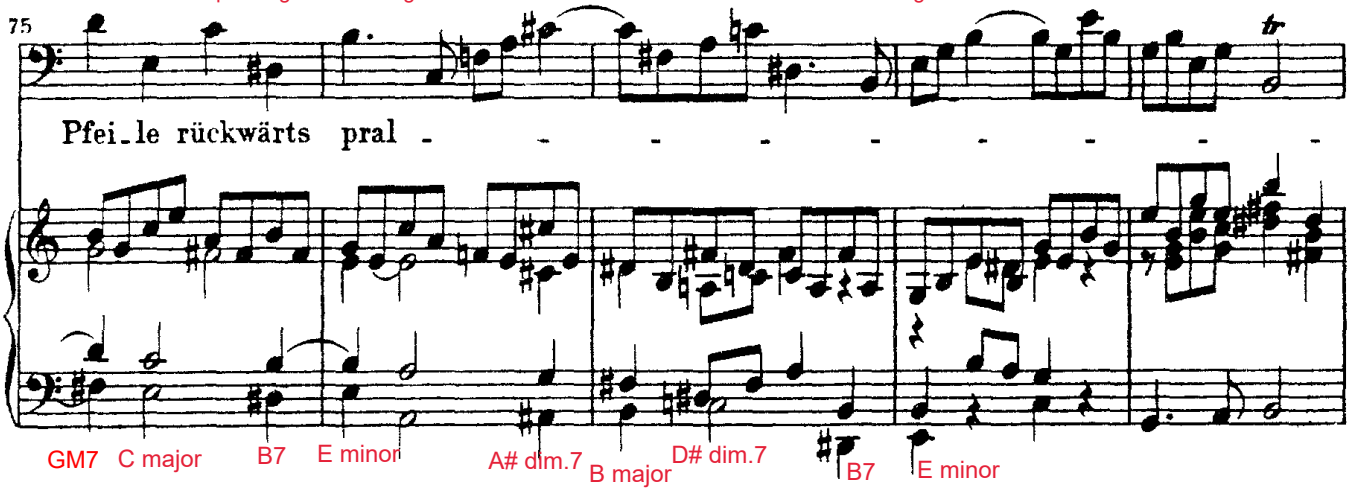

46
B Section
Text painting: Chromaticism for tears; Melisma for joy. Allusion to Psalm 126:5–6.
Er lässt nach Thrä - - - nen und nach Wei - - nen die Freu - - -
p
C major
A minor
A minor
51
Text painting: Long melisma for "shine."
- - den-son-ne wie - der schei - - - - - - - -
D major D7
G major
G major
D dominant...
56
- nen, die Freuden-son-ne wie-der schei - - - nen;
f Ritornello
D7 G major
G major
Text painting: Chromaticism for storm of affliction.
61
das Trüb - sals-wet - ter
G major
C# dim.7



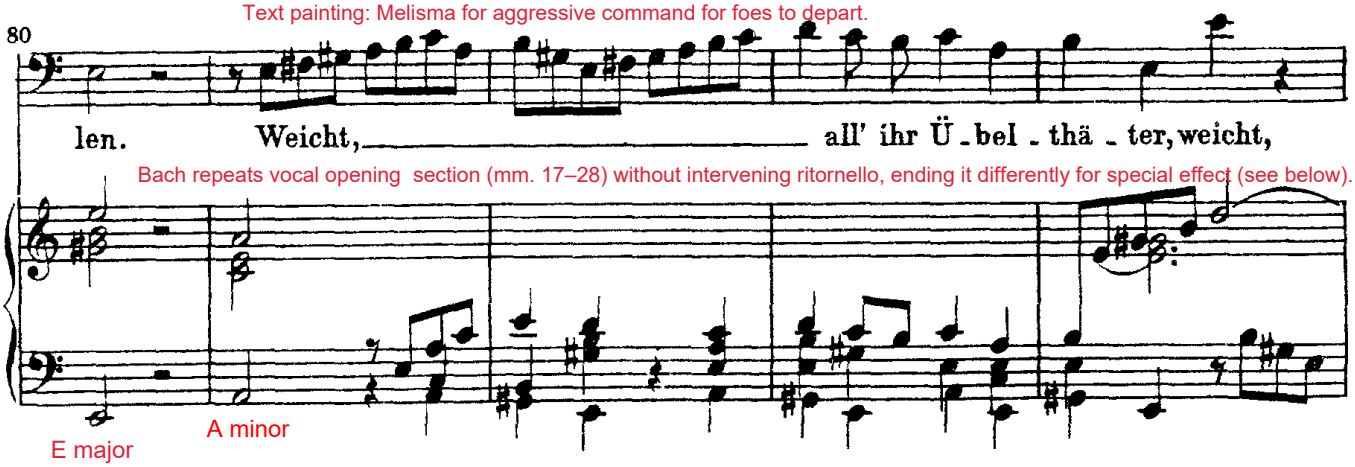
Text painting: Chromaticism and downward leaps for sudden downfall of enemies.



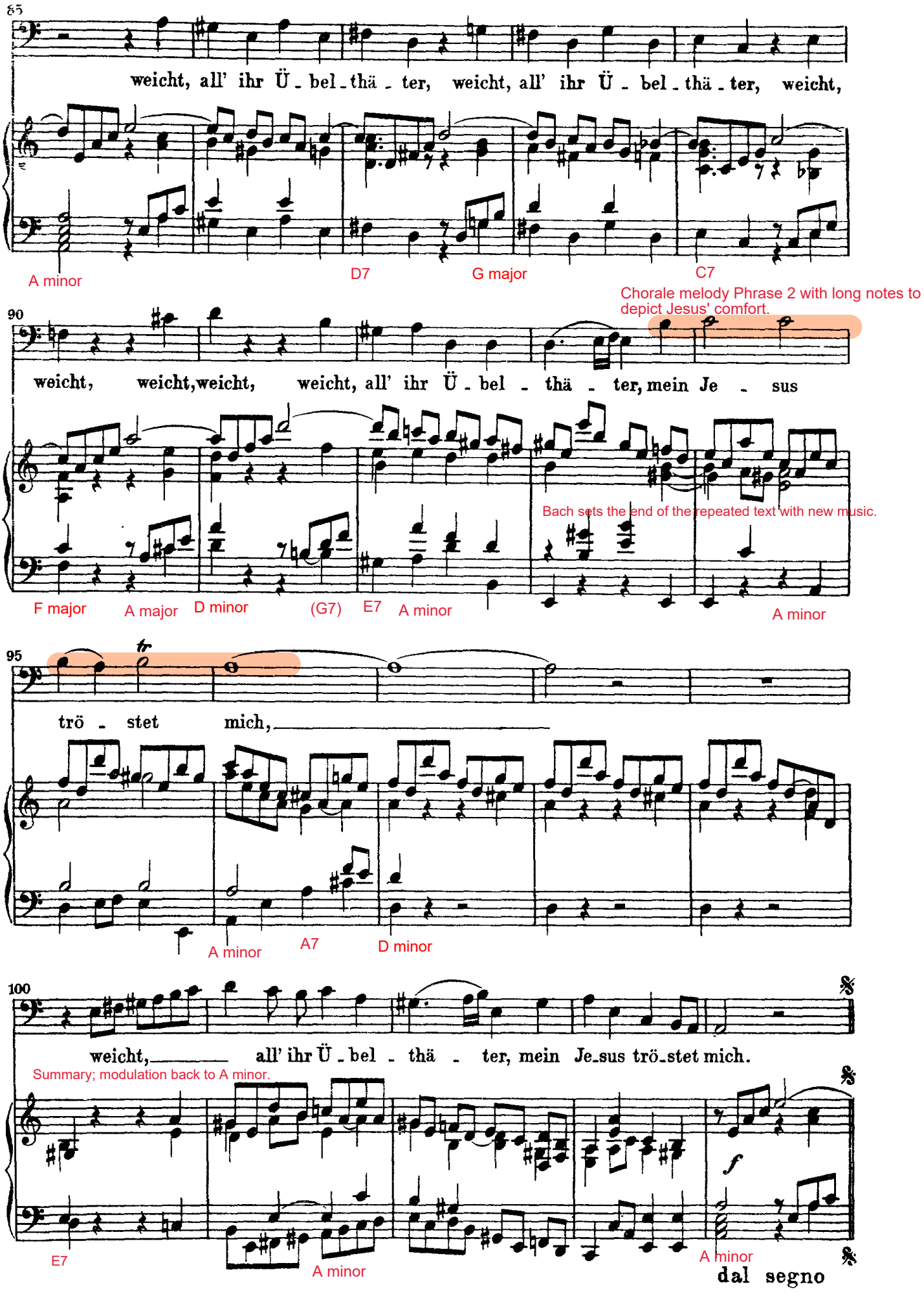
Text painting: Descending chromatic line for the arrows that recoil backwards against the attackers.

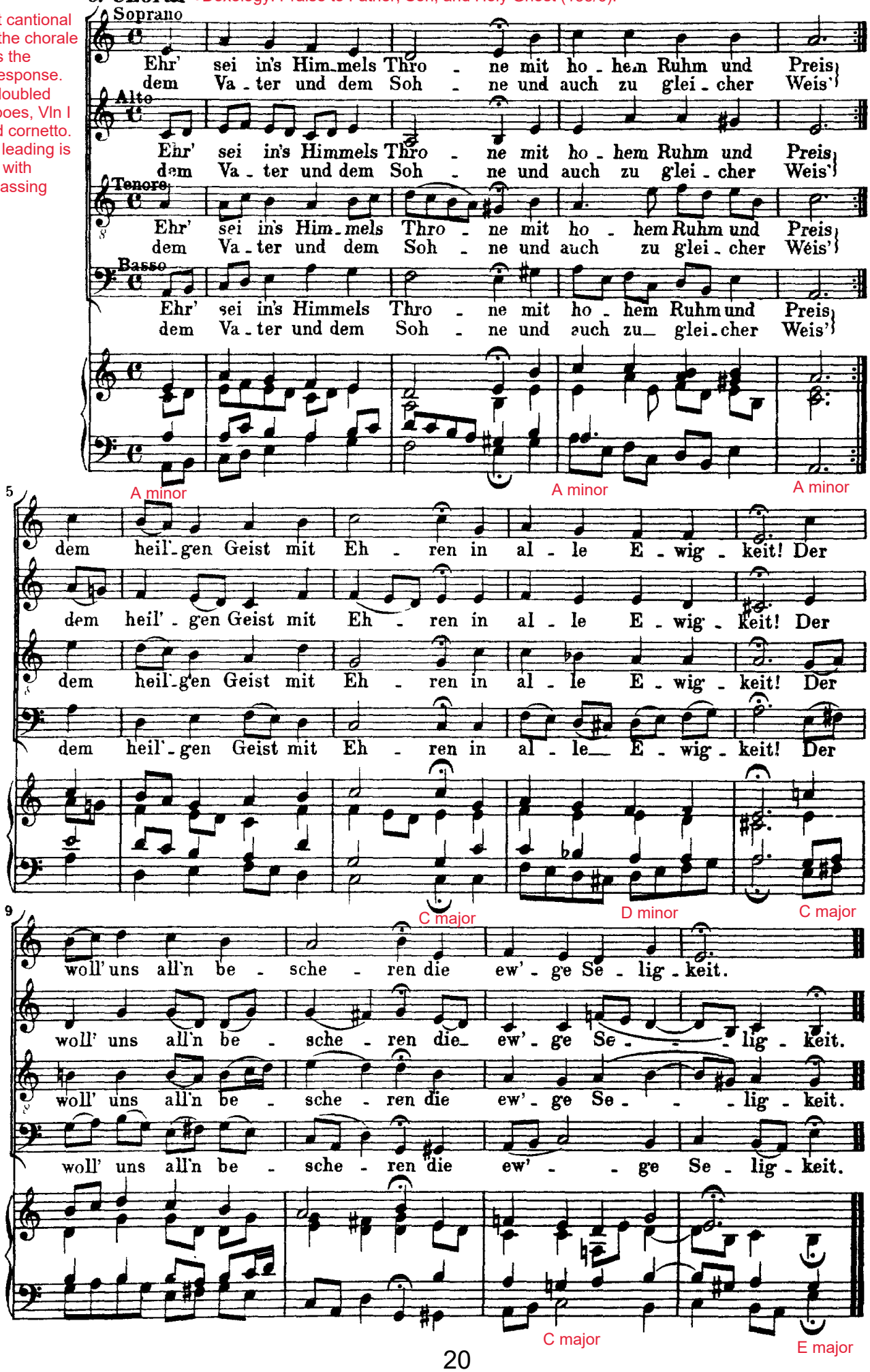


Text painting: Melisma for aggressive command for foes to depart.



Bach repeats vocal opening section (mm. 17–28) without intervening ritornello, ending it differently for special effect (see below).


85
weicht, all' ihr Ü - bel - thä - ter, weicht, all' ihr Ü - bel - thä - ter, weicht,
A minor
D7
G major
C7
Chorale melody Phrase 2 with long notes to depict Jesus' comfort.
90
weicht, weicht, weicht, weicht, all' ihr Ü - bel - thä - ter, mein Je - sus
Bach sets the end of the repeated text with new music.
F major
A major
D minor
(G7)
E7
A minor
A minor
95
trö - stet mich,
A minor
A7
D minor
100
weicht, all' ihr Ü - bel - thä - ter, mein Je-sus trö-stet mich.
Summary; modulation back to A minor.
E7
A minor
A minor
dal segno

135/6. **6. Choral** (Vs. 6 verbatim)
•Doxology: Praise to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (135/6).

The 4-part cantional setting of the chorale represents the church's response. Soprano doubled by both oboes, Vln I and added cornetto. The voice leading is enhanced with 8th-note passing tones.