Last changed: 8 November 2025.

Introduction & updates at melvinunger.com.

NBA I/18; BC A51

Oculi: 3. S. in Lent (BWV 54 only). Originally without specification (Wolff, "J. S. Bach. The Learned Musician," 163)

*Ephesians 5:1–9 (Exhortation to pure living)

*Luke 11:14–28 (Accusation that Christ drove out demons by Beelzebul)

Alfred Dürr suggests this cantata also suits the 7. S. after Trinity (See Dürr/Jones, 254).

+Romans 6:19–23 (The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life)

+Mark 8:1–9 (Jesus feeds the four thousand)

Librettist: Georg Christian Lehms (see note)

Composed in Bach's Weimar period.

FP: perhaps 24 March 1715 (see side note).

Instrumentation:
Vln I, II
Vla I, II
Alto
Continuo

Note: Double viola parts are typical of Bach's Weimar cantatas to Easter 1715. See Petzoldt 2:641.

Cantata

Short Theatrical Cantata for Alto About Resisting Sin.

Form: Aria (A) - Recit (A) - aria (A). Without chorus or chorale, the cantata follows Italian models. It is one of only 12 extant church cantatas for solo voice; and one of only 9 without SATB ensemble or chorus. Solo cantatas include: for S: nos. 51, 52, 84, 199; for A: 35, 54, 169, 170, 200; for T: 55; and for B: 56, 82. Since Bach added chorales to other librettos by Georg Christian Lehms, Martin Petzoldt suggests adding the 16th stanza of the chorale "Jesu, meiner Seelen Wonne," a 19-stanza hymn by Martin Jan (ca. 1620–1682), using the tune "Jesu, der du meine Seele." (See side note and below at 54/3.)

J.S. Bach

# Cantata No. 54

## Widerstehe doch der Sünde

The text of the opening aria alludes to various scriptures (see side note).

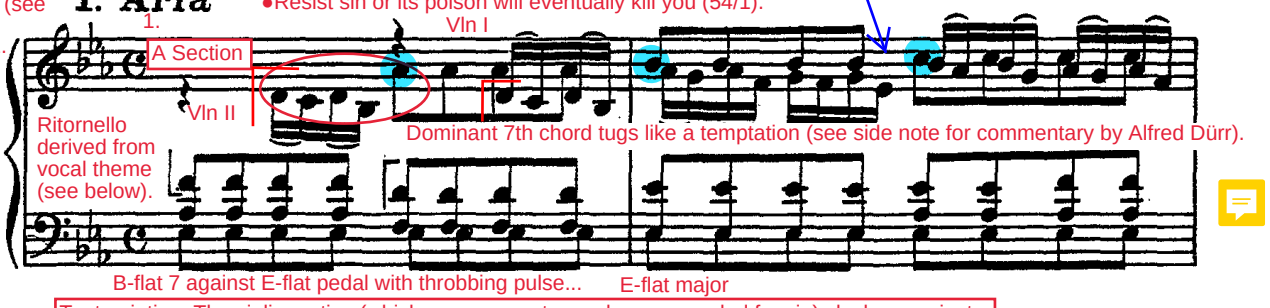
The cantata was notated in Chorton. See side note.

Da capo

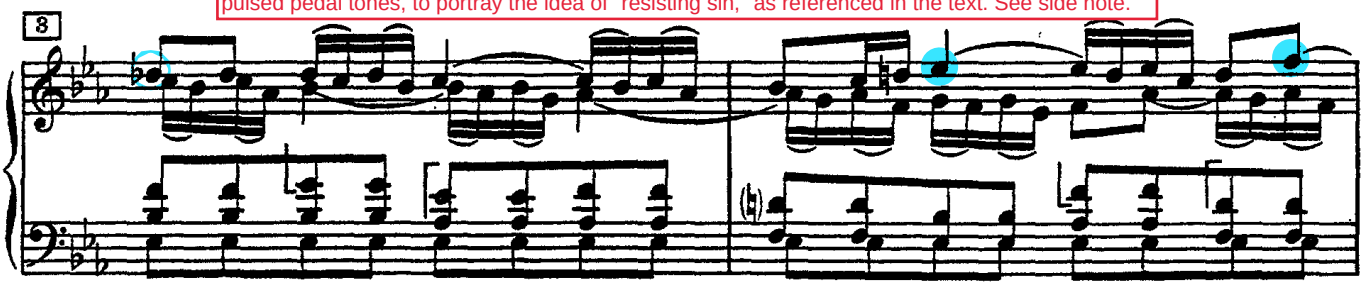
### 1. Aria

•Resist sin or its poison will eventually kill you (54/1).

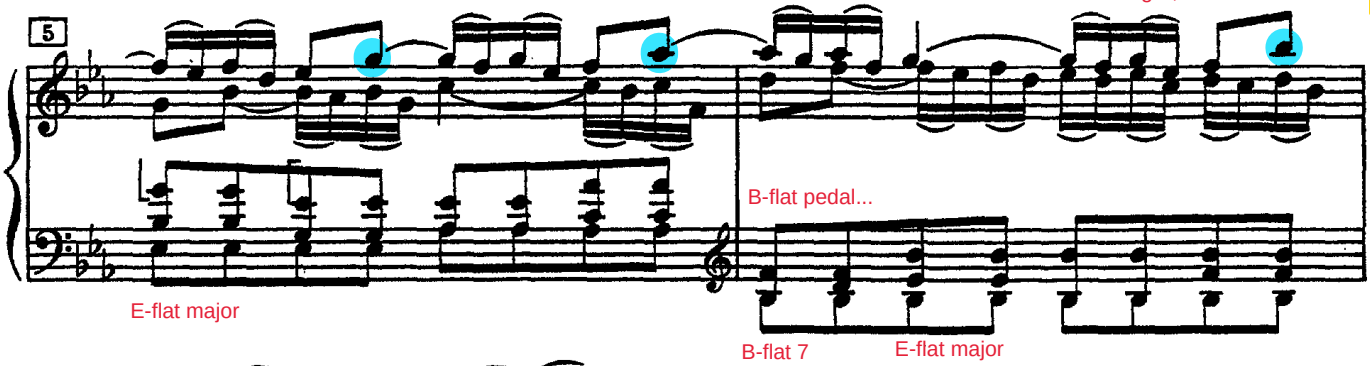
The tempting figure rises tantalizingly more than an octave with suspensions adding dissonance.

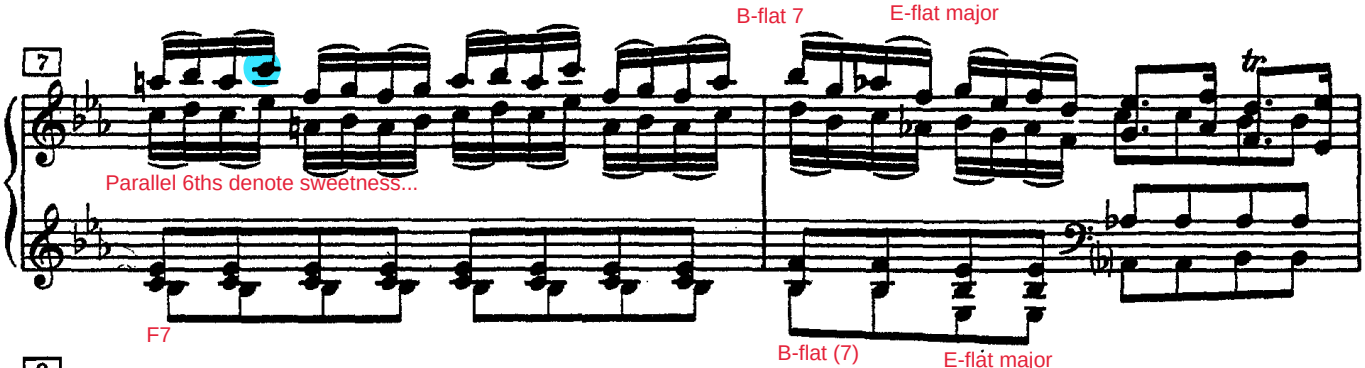


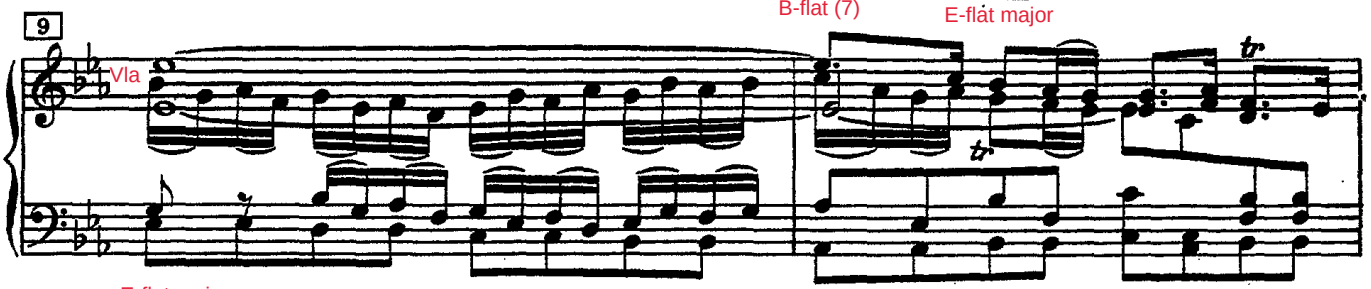

Text painting: The violin motive (which may suggest a snake as a symbol for sin) clashes against pulsed pedal tones, to portray the idea of "resisting sin," as referenced in the text. See side note.




For comments on the first movement by Ulrich Leisinger, see note.

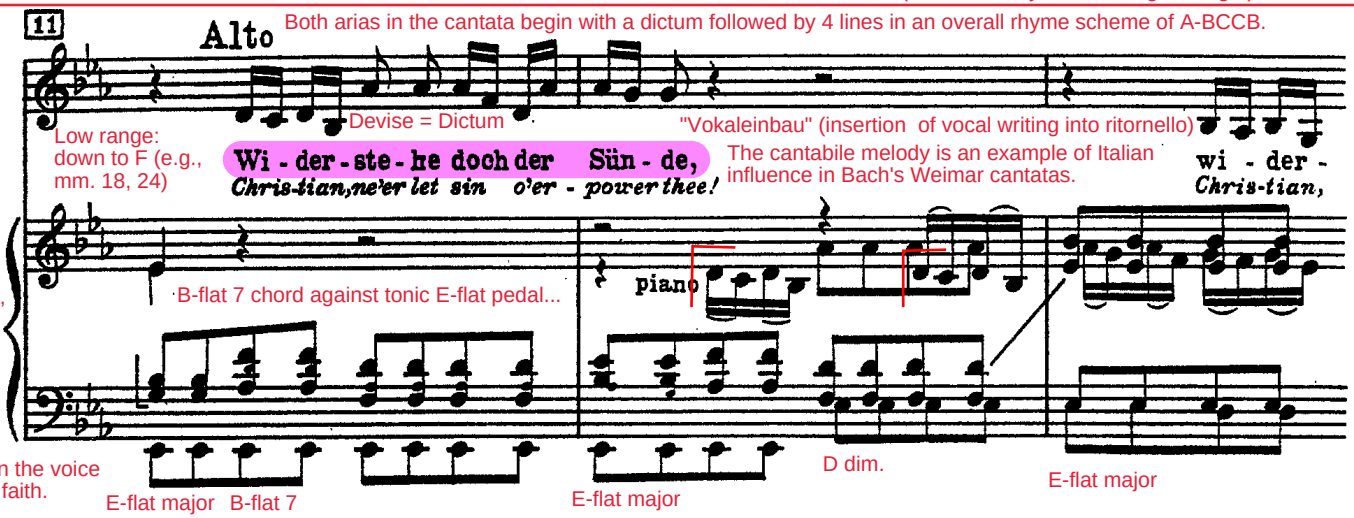


This type of aria is called a “Devisenarie” (a term coined by Hugo Riemann) or “motto aria.” After the ritornello, the singer presents the first phrase of the aria as a kind of motto. This is followed by a short instrumental bridge before the aria proper begins. The motto sets the tone (and the literary perspective) for the movement. Bach later re-used this aria in the St. Mark Passion to the text "Falsche Welt, dein schmeichelnd Küssen..." (False world, your flattering kissing...). See note above.

Both arias in the cantata begin with a dictum followed by 4 lines in an overall rhyme scheme of A-BCCB.




Vocal range in cantata is f to c".

Low range: down to F (e.g., mm. 18, 24)

Devise = Dictum

"Vokaleinbau" (insertion of vocal writing into ritornello)

The cantabile melody is an example of Italian influence in Bach's Weimar cantatas.

For biblical background, see note.

Alto is often the voice of intimate faith.

B-flat 7 chord against tonic E-flat pedal...

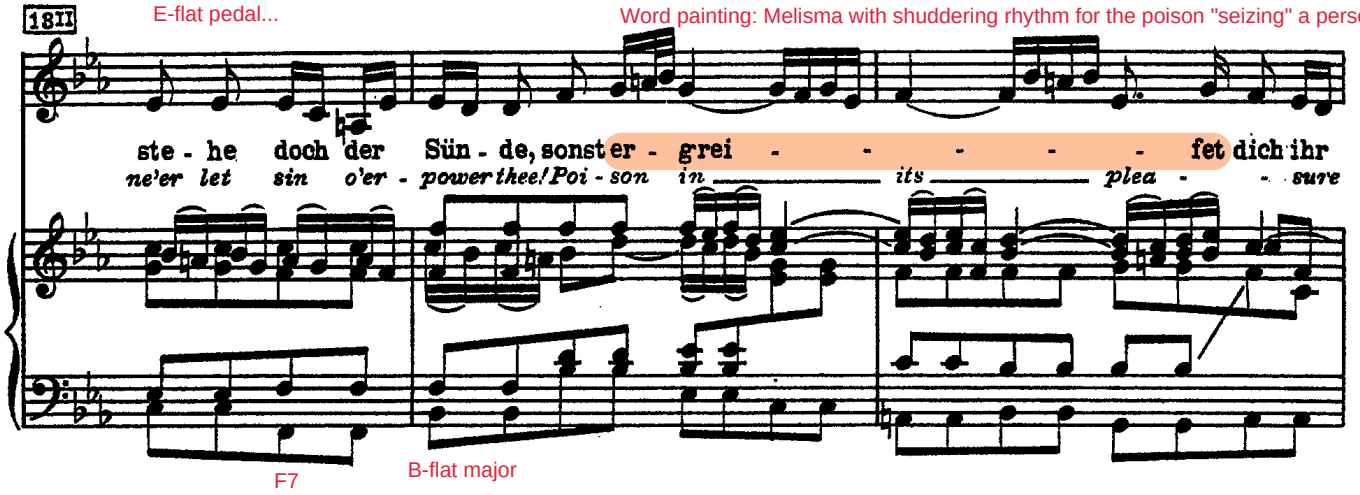
E-flat major B-flat 7 E-flat pedal...

E-flat major

D dim.

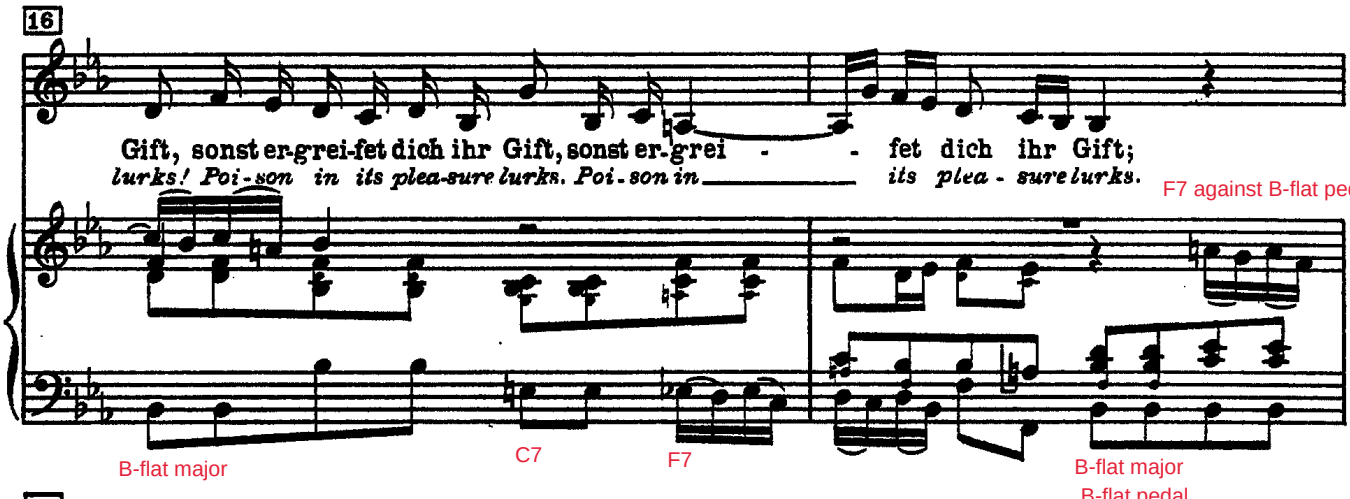
E-flat major

Word painting: Melisma with shuddering rhythm for the poison "seizing" a person.




F7

B-flat major




F7 against B-flat pedal.

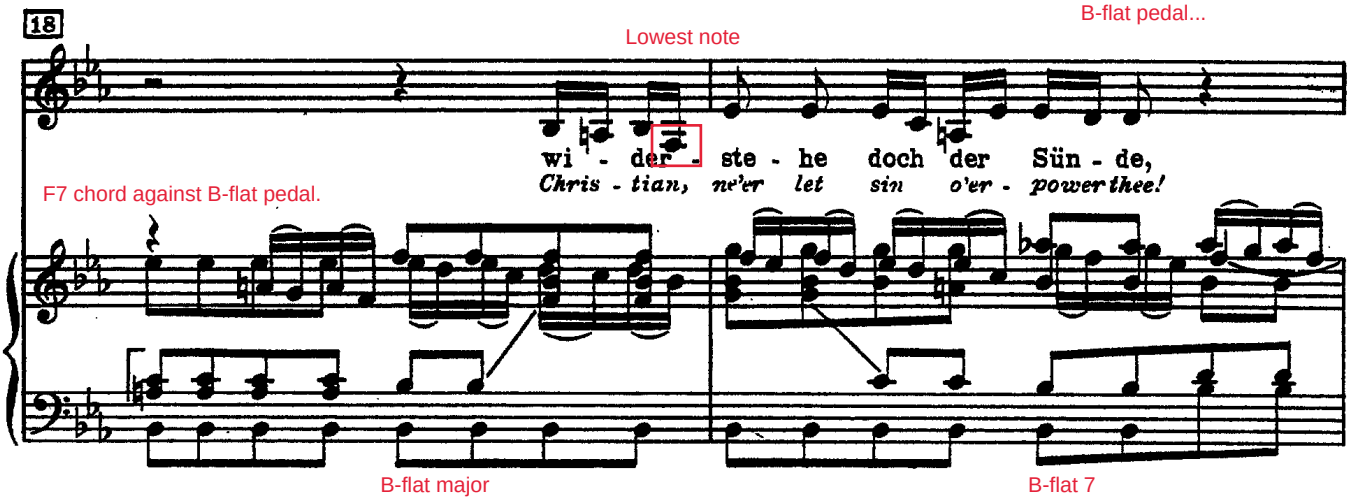
B-flat major

C7

F7

B-flat major

B-flat pedal...

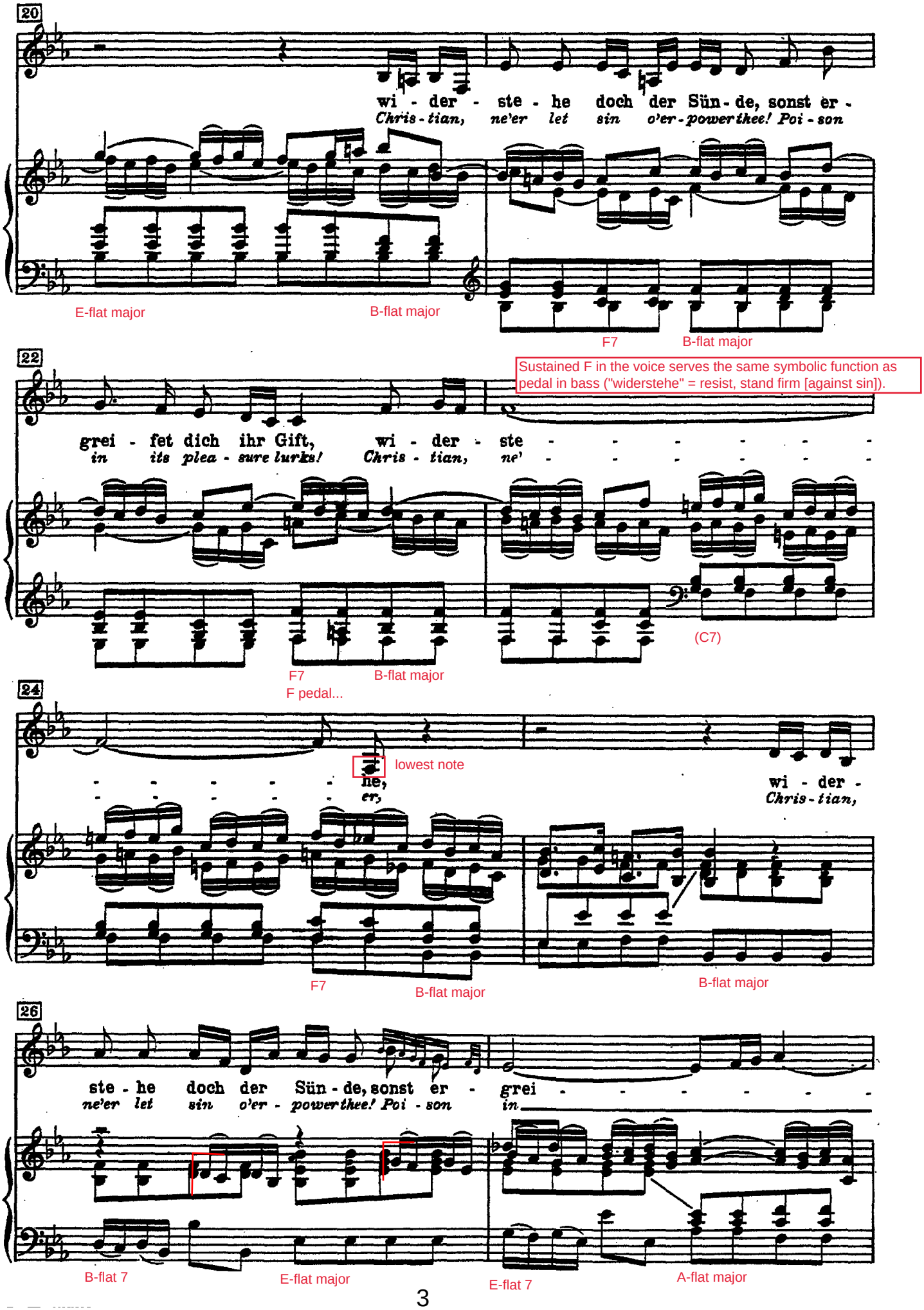



Lowest note

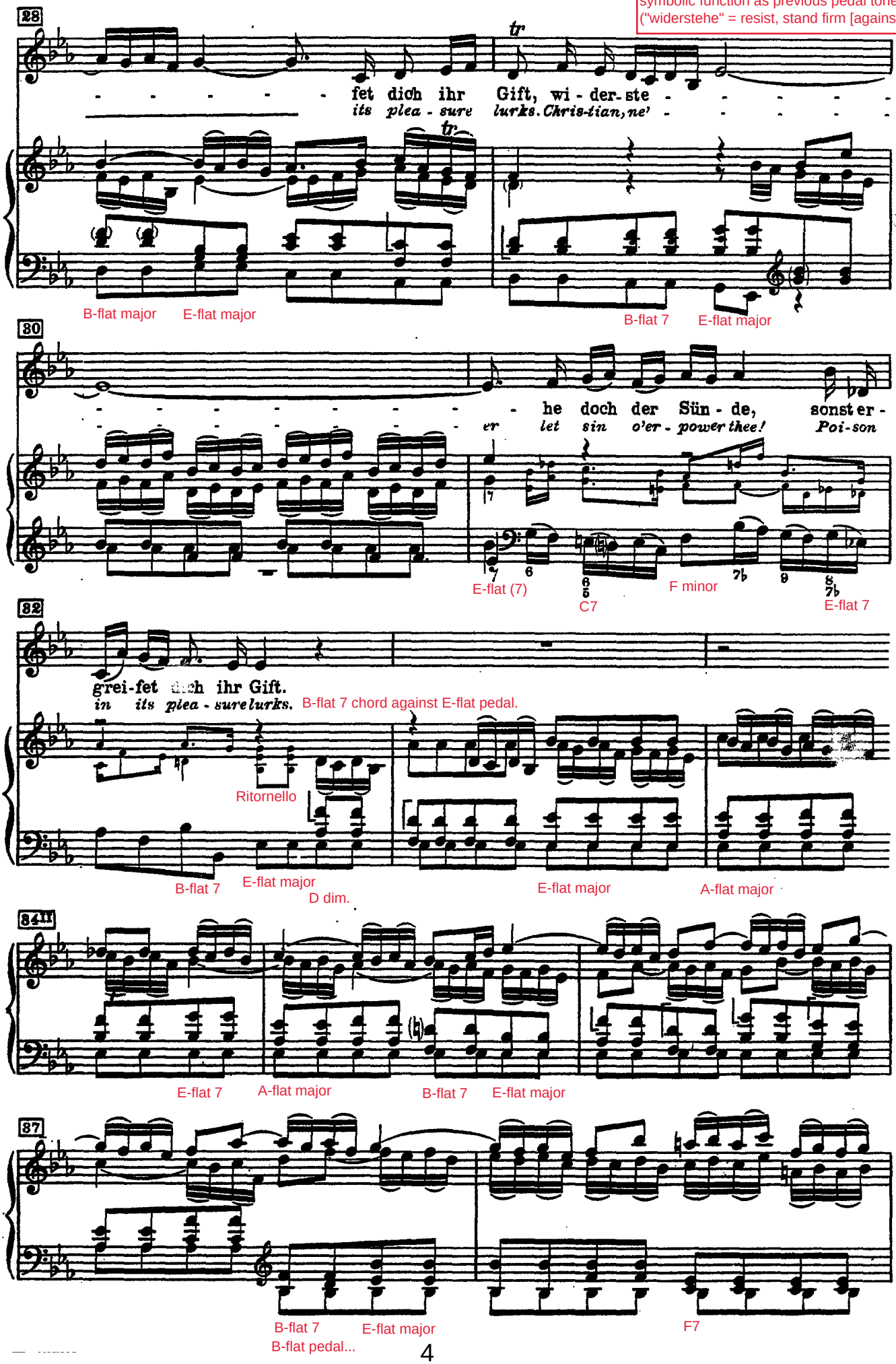
F7 chord against B-flat pedal.

B-flat major

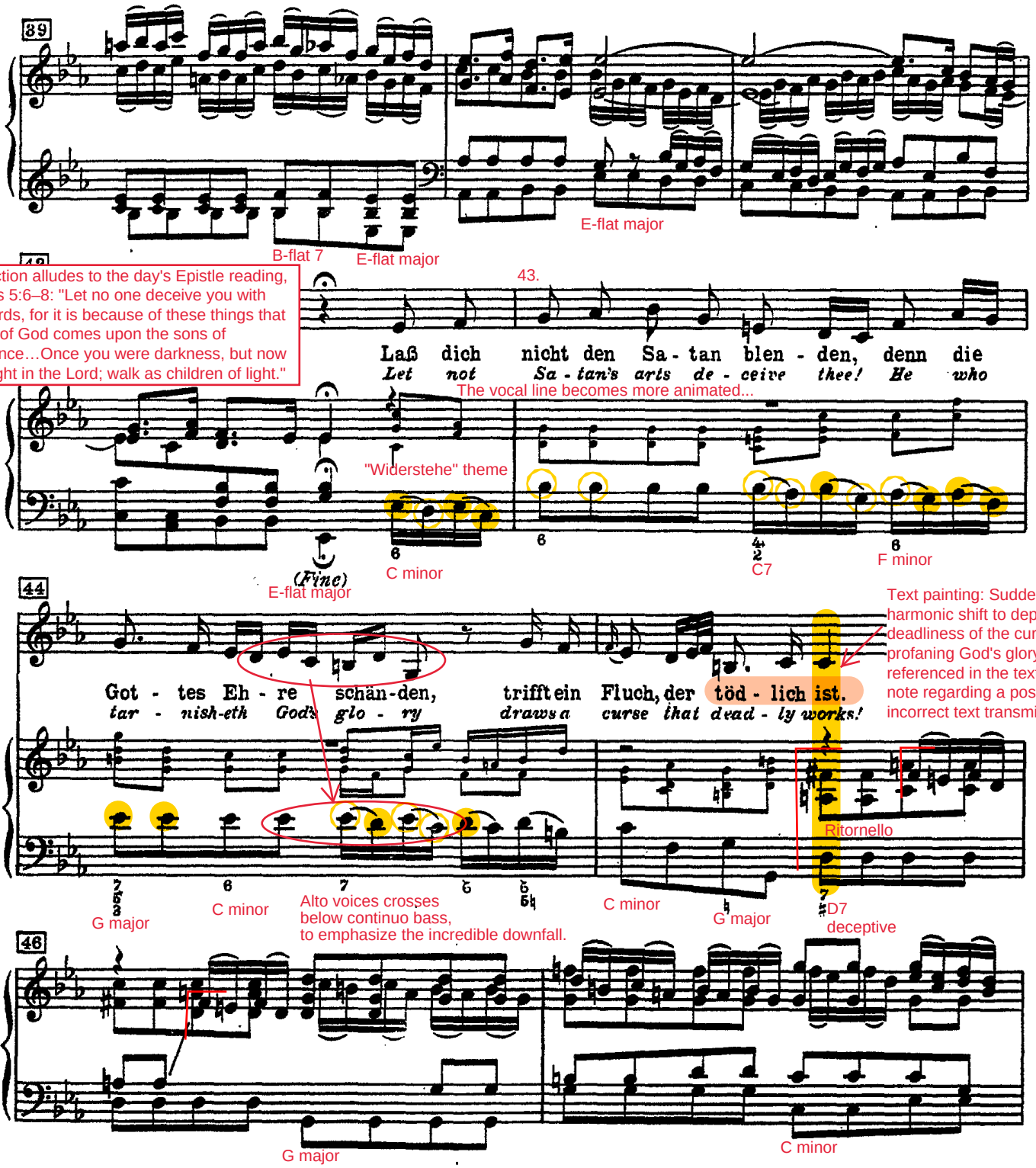
B-flat 7


20
wi - der - ste - he doch der Sün - de, sonst er -
Chris - tian, ne'er let sin o'er - power thee! Poi - son
E-flat major
B-flat major
F7
B-flat major
22
Sustained F in the voice serves the same symbolic function as pedal in bass ("widerstehe" = resist, stand firm [against sin]).
grei - fet dich ihr Gift, wi - der - ste - - - - - - -
in its plea - sure lurks! Chris - tian, ne' - - - - - - -
(C7)
F7
B-flat major
F pedal...
24
lowest note
ne,
er,
wi - der -
Chris - tian,
F7
B-flat major
B-flat major
26
ste - he doch der Sün - de, sonst er - grei - - - - - -
ne'er let sin o'er - power thee! Poi - son in
B-flat 7
E-flat major
E-flat 7
A-flat major

Sustained E-flat in the voice serves the same symbolic function as previous pedal tones ("widerstehe" = resist, stand firm [against sin]).

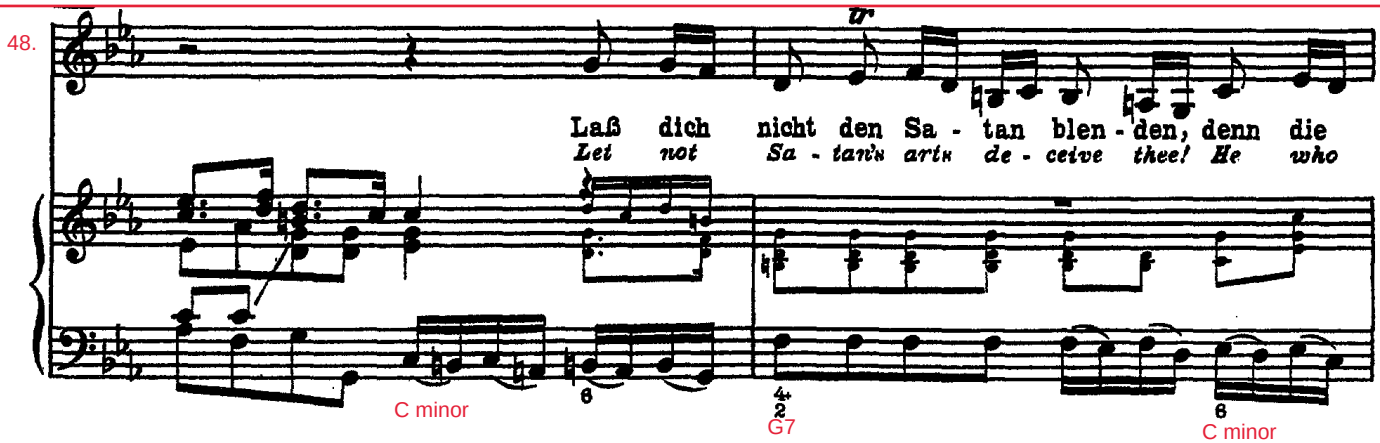


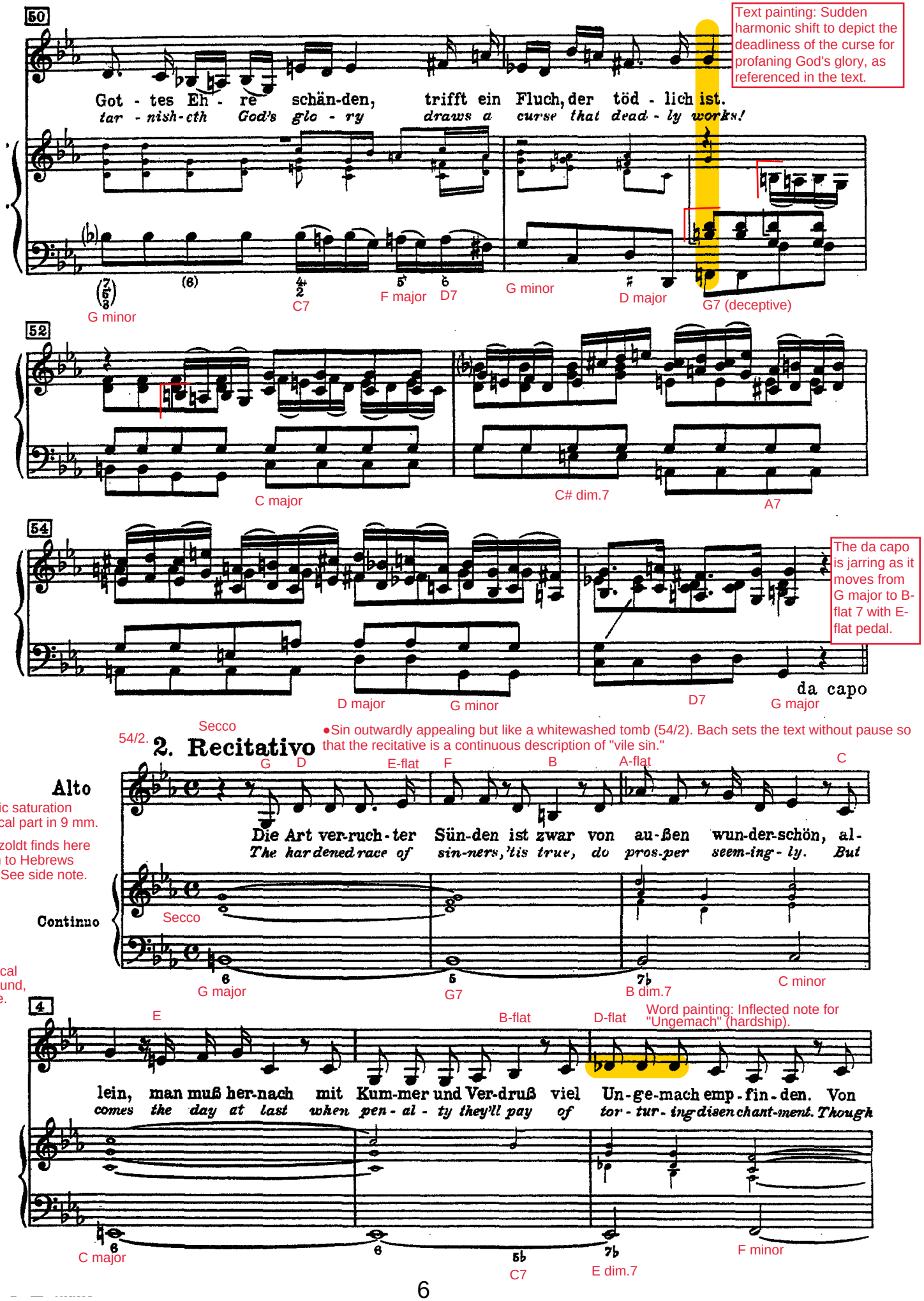
Alfred Dürr notes, "The middle section of the aria...is also full of harmonic audacities, among which the repeated deceptive cadence is unfailingly effective as a description of the 'curse that is deadly.' Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, trans. Richard Jones, 255.



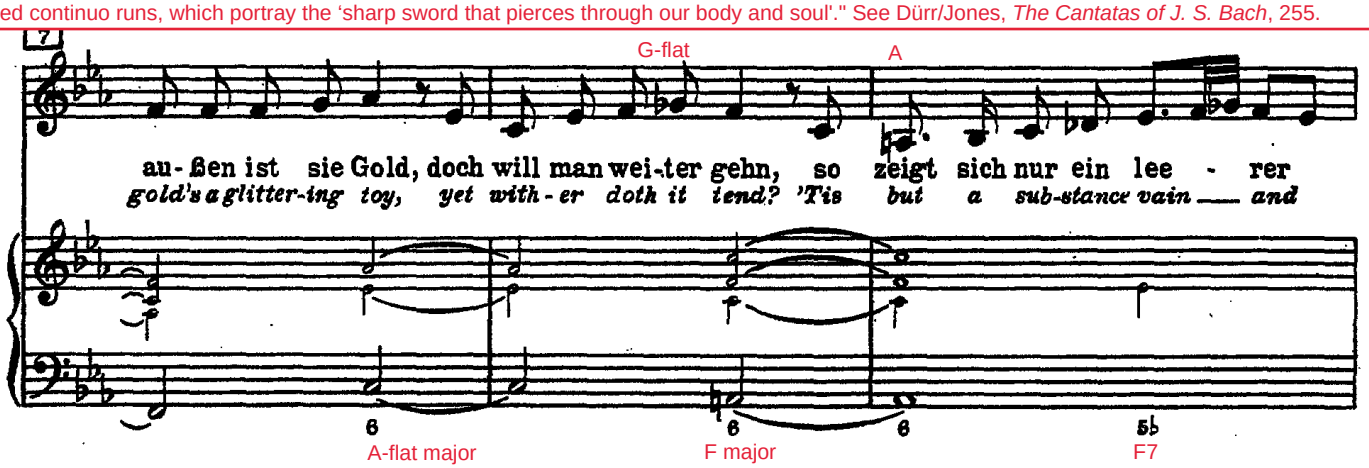

The B section alludes to the day's Epistle reading, Ephesians 5:6–8: "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience…Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light."

Petzoldt quotes Konrad Küster, saying the ritornello is given atypical emphasis in that it must compensate for the deceptive cadences. See *Bach-Kommentar* 2:642.

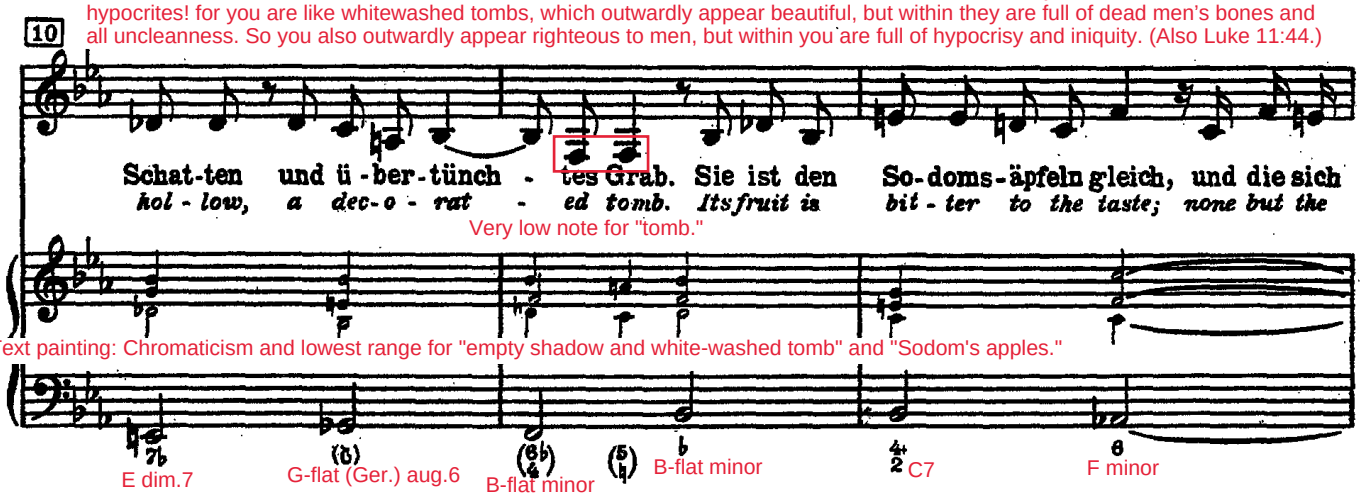



Text painting: Sudden harmonic shift to depict the deadliness of the curse for profaning God's glory, as referenced in the text.
50
Got - tes Eh - re schän-den, trifft ein Fluch, der töd - lich ist.
tar - nish-eth God's glo - ry draws a curse that dead - ly works!
G minor
C7
F major
D7
G minor
D major
G7 (deceptive)
52
C major
C# dim.7
A7
54
The da capo is jarring as it moves from G major to B-flat 7 with E-flat pedal.
D major
G minor
D7
G major
da capo
Secco
54/2.
2. Recitativo
•Sin outwardly appealing but like a whitewashed tomb (54/2). Bach sets the text without pause so that the recitative is a continuous description of "vile sin."
G
D
E-flat
F
B
A-flat
C
Alto
Chromatic saturation in the vocal part in 9 mm.
Martin Petzoldt finds here an allusion to Hebrews 11:25–26. See side note.
Die Art ver-ruch-ter Sün-den ist zwar von au-ßen wun-der-schön, al-
The har-dened race of sin-ners, 'tis true, do pros-per seem-ing-ly. But
Continuo
Secco
For biblical background, see note.
G major
G7
B dim.7
C minor
4
E
B-flat
D-flat
Word painting: Inflected note for "Ungemach" (hardship).
lein, man muß her-nach mit Kum-mer und Ver-druß viel Un-ge-mach emp-fin-den. Von
comes the day at last when pen - al - ty they'll pay of tor - tur - ing dis-en-chant-ment. Though
C major
C7
E dim.7
F minor

Alfred Dürr writes, "The recitative, no. 2, is again boldly descriptive. The phrase 'an empty shadow and a whited sepulchre' has an immediately graphic effect with its lurid harmony. And the arioso conclusion—a feature of numerous recitatives by the young Bach—here draws its significance from the quick, text-engendered continuo runs, which portray the 'sharp sword that pierces through our body and soul'." See Dürr/Jones, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, 255.

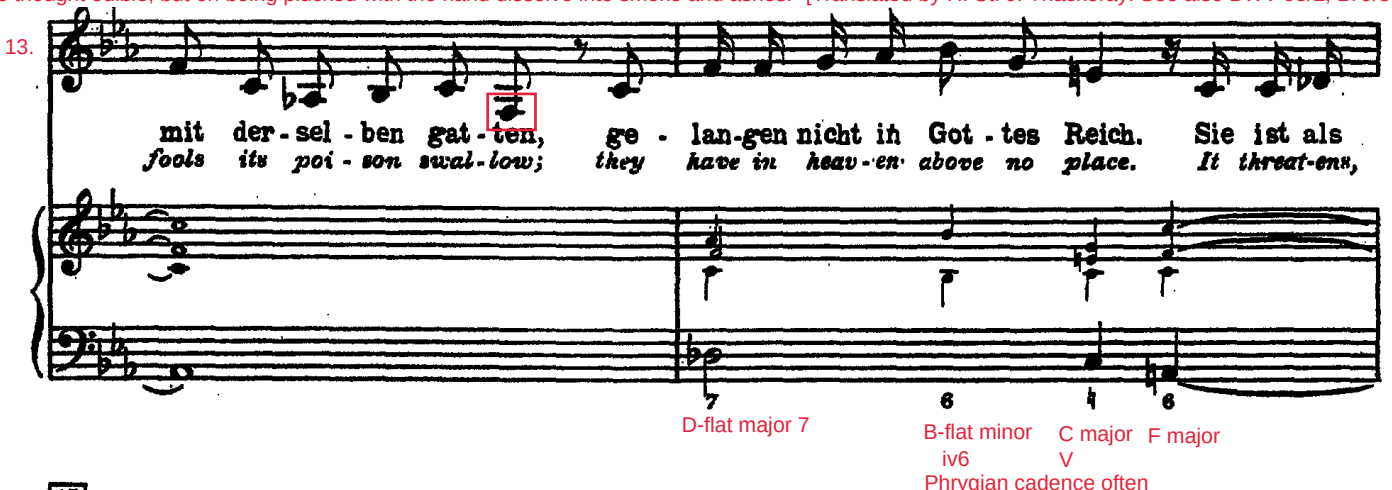


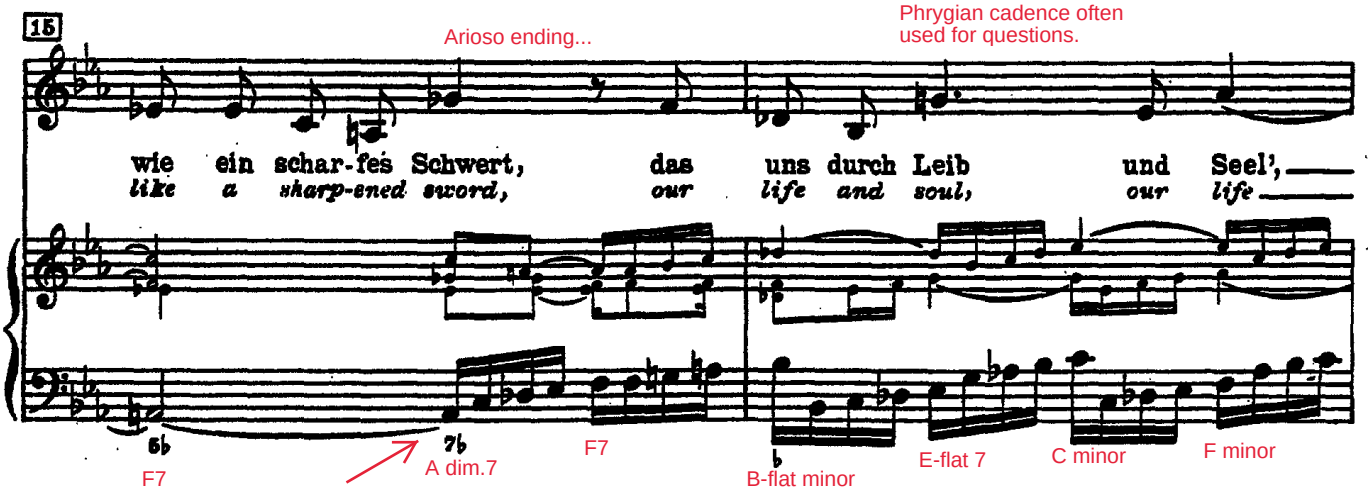

The reference to "white-washed tombs" is reminiscent of Jesus' words in Matthew 23:27–28: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Also Luke 11:44.)




Text painting: Chromaticism and lowest range for "empty shadow and white-washed tomb" and "Sodom's apples."

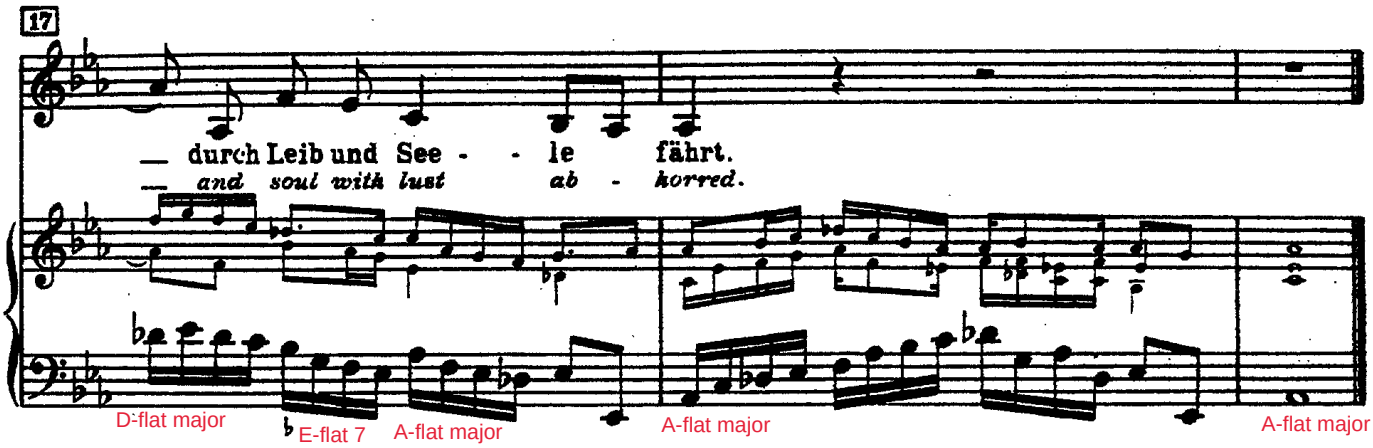
"Sodom's apples" alludes to Josephus IV:483–485: "It is said that, owing to the impiety of its inhabitants, [Sodom] was consumed by thunderbolts; and in fact vestiges of the divine fire and faint traces of five cities are still visible. Still, too, may one see ashes reproduced in the fruits, which from their outward appearance would be thought edible, but on being plucked with the hand dissolve into smoke and ashes." [Translated by H. St. J. Thackeray. See also BWV 95/2, 179/3.]




Text painting: Arioso ending with running 16th notes in the continuo that depict the sharp sword piercing body and soul.

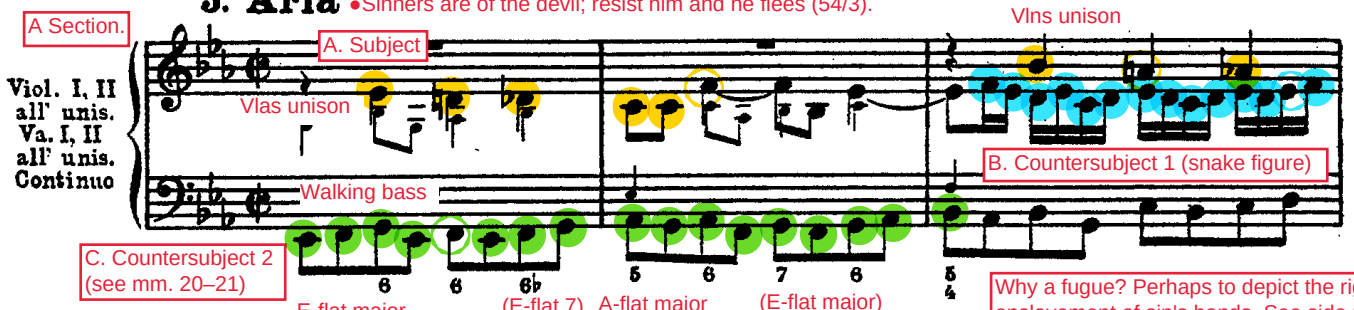
Martin Petzoldt (*Bach-Kommentar* 2:643) notes that the end of the recitative is reminiscent of Simeon's prophecy that a sword would pierce Mary's soul...brought to mind by the end of the day's Gospel reading where a woman shouts that the womb that bore Jesus was blessed. See side note for the biblical passages.




Ternary structure/permutation fugue (common in Bach's Weimar works) in a 4-part texture: a chromatically descending subject (perhaps the tug of sin), a first countersubject (perhaps the devil as a snake), and a second countersubject rising in scalar fashion (perhaps Satan as the father of sin—rearing sin as his child).

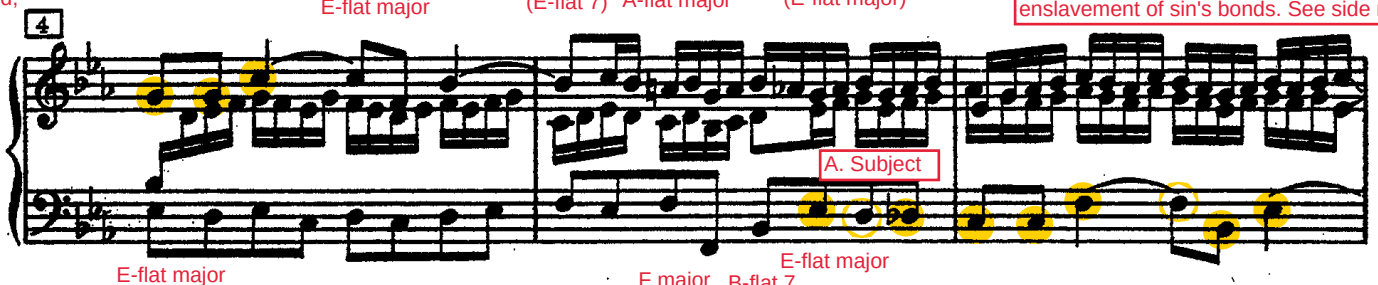
54/3. **3. Aria** •Sinners are of the devil; resist him and he flees (54/3).

Form: See side note.



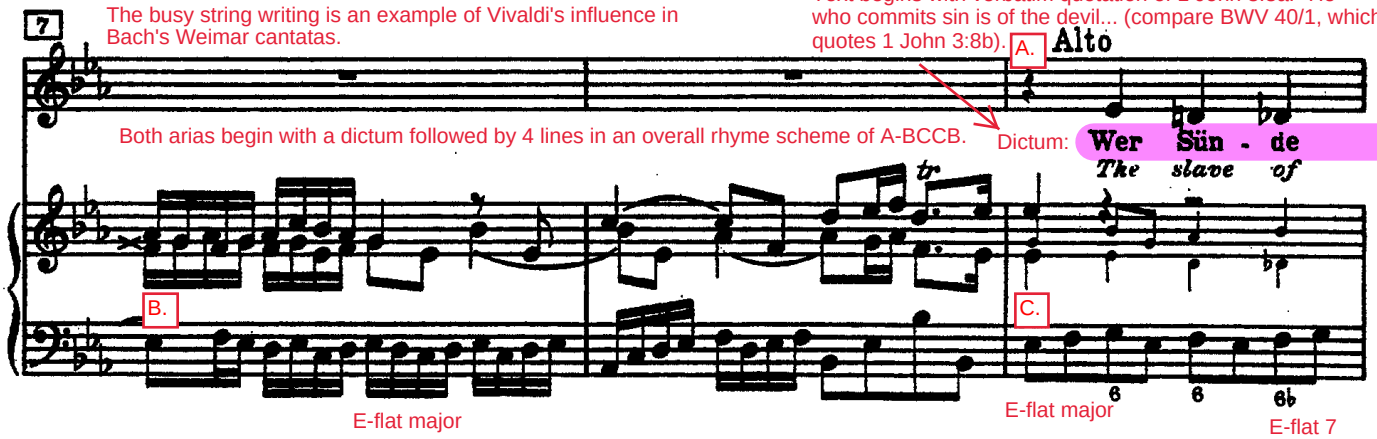

For biblica background, see note.

Why a fugue? Perhaps to depict the rigid enslavement of sin's bonds. See side note.




The busy string writing is an example of Vivaldi's influence in Bach's Weimar cantatas.

Text begins with verbatim quotation of 1 John 3:8a: "He who commits sin is of the devil... (compare BWV 40/1, which quotes 1 John 3:8b).

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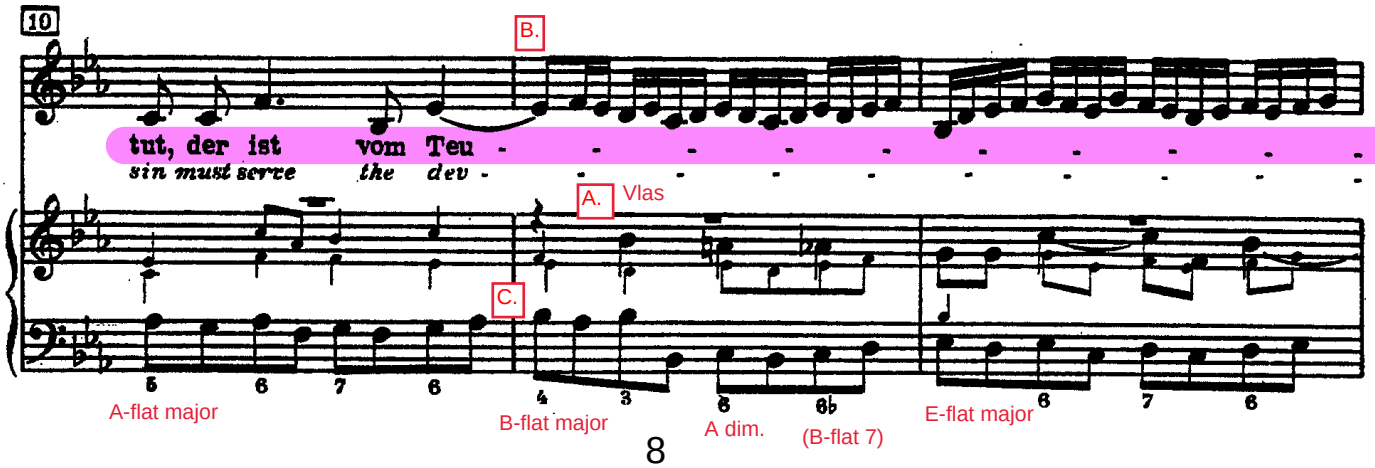
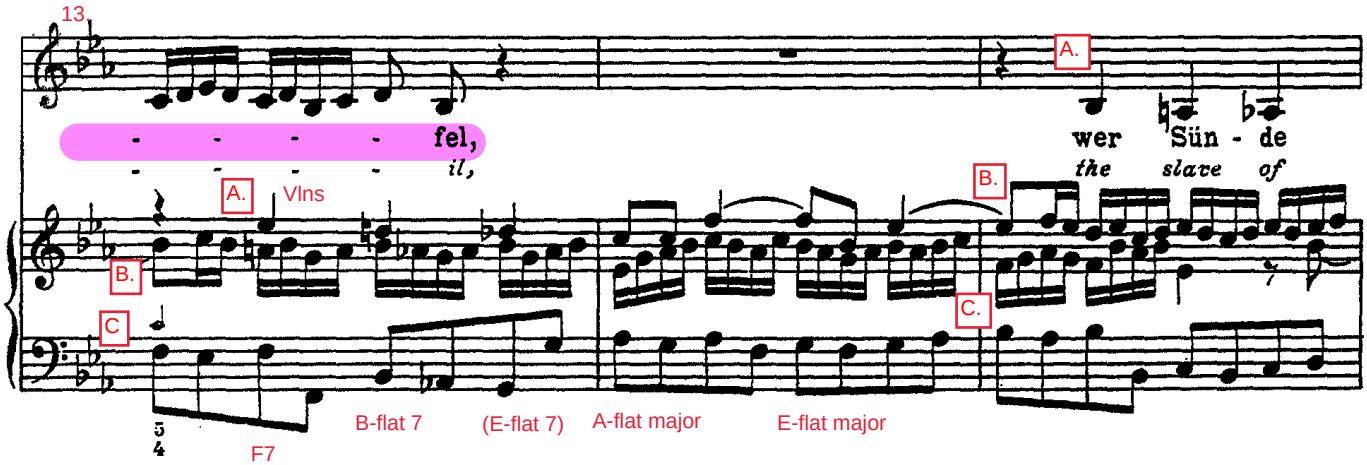
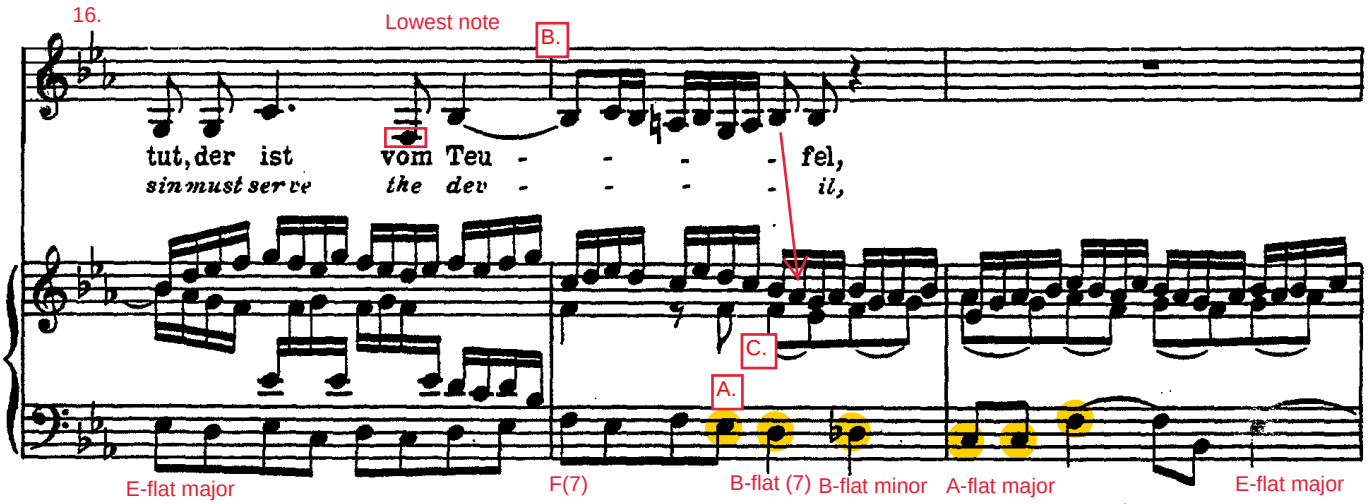
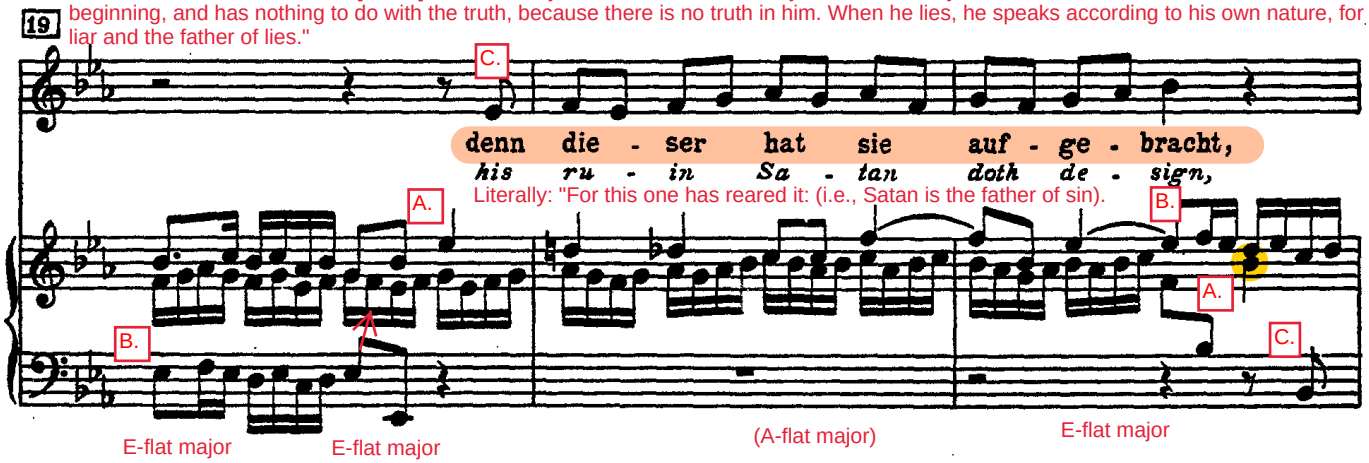
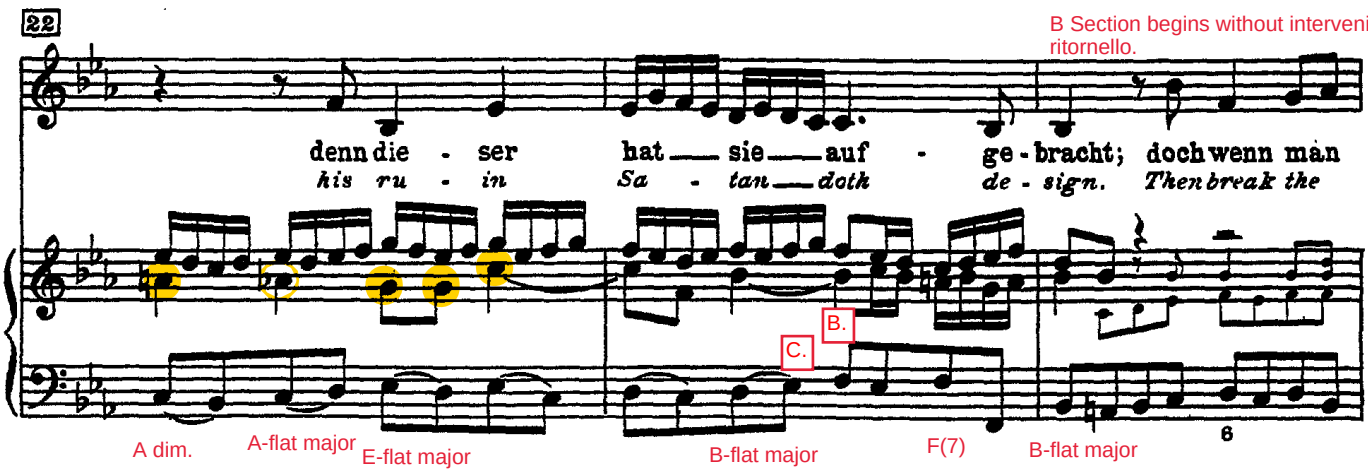


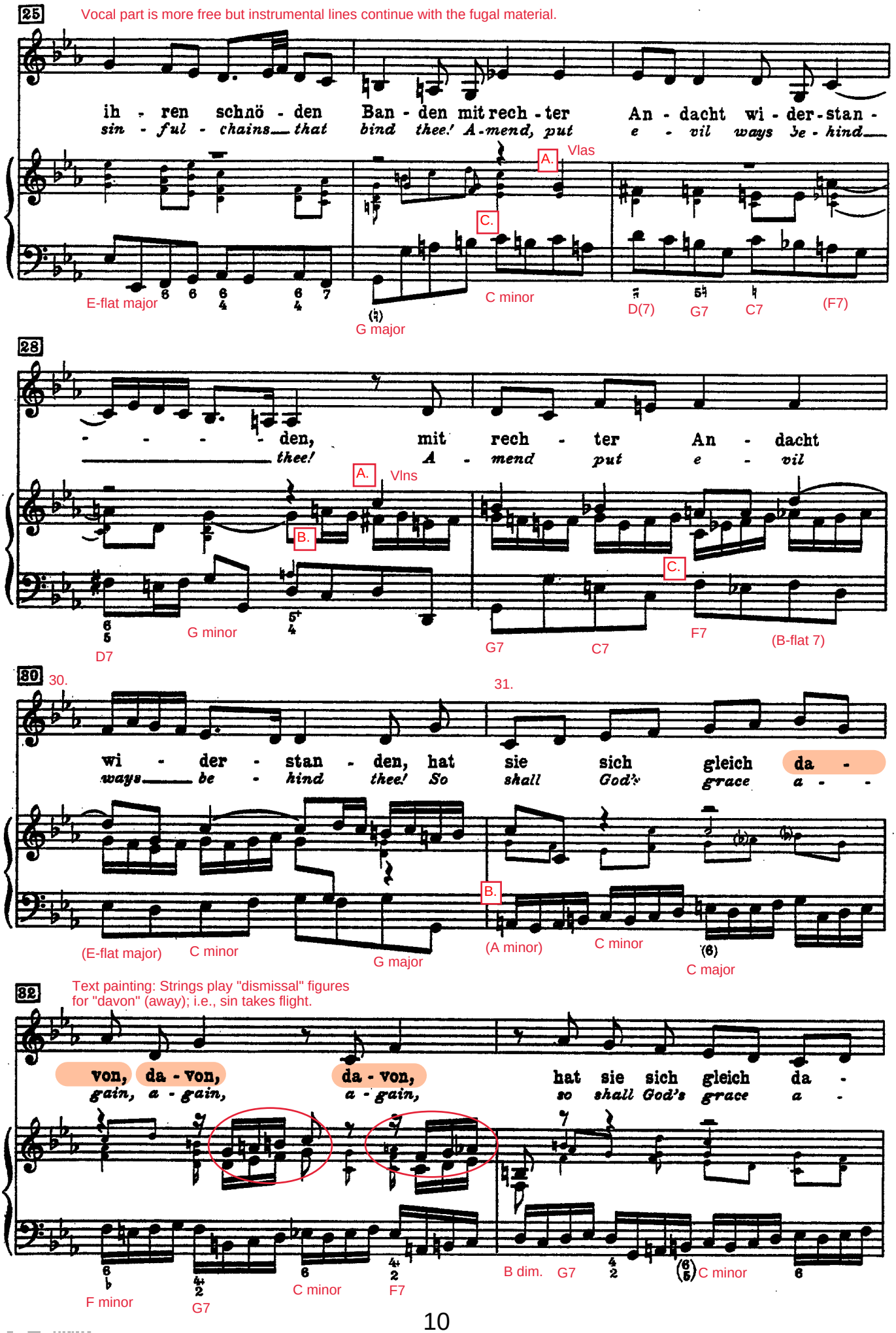


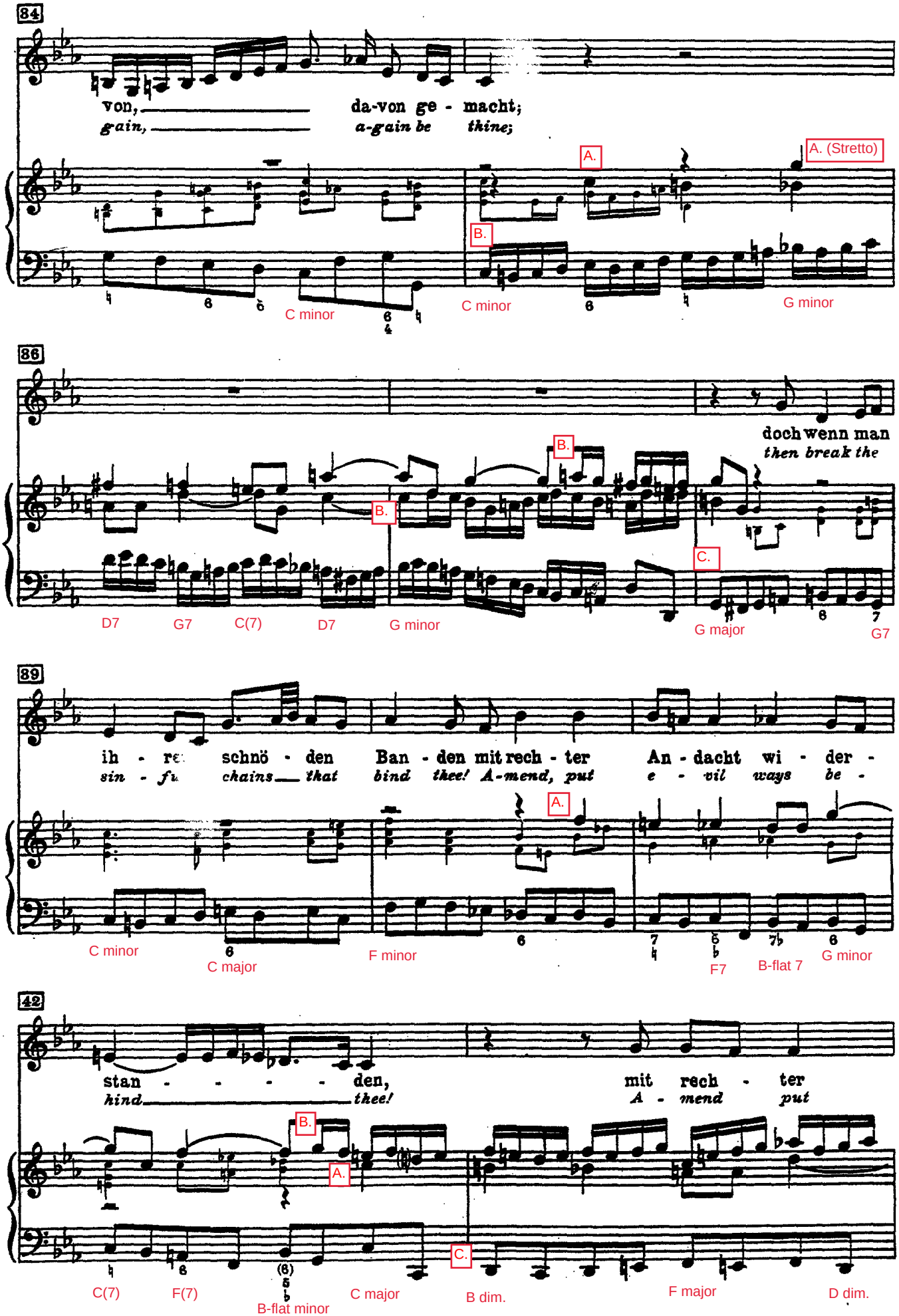



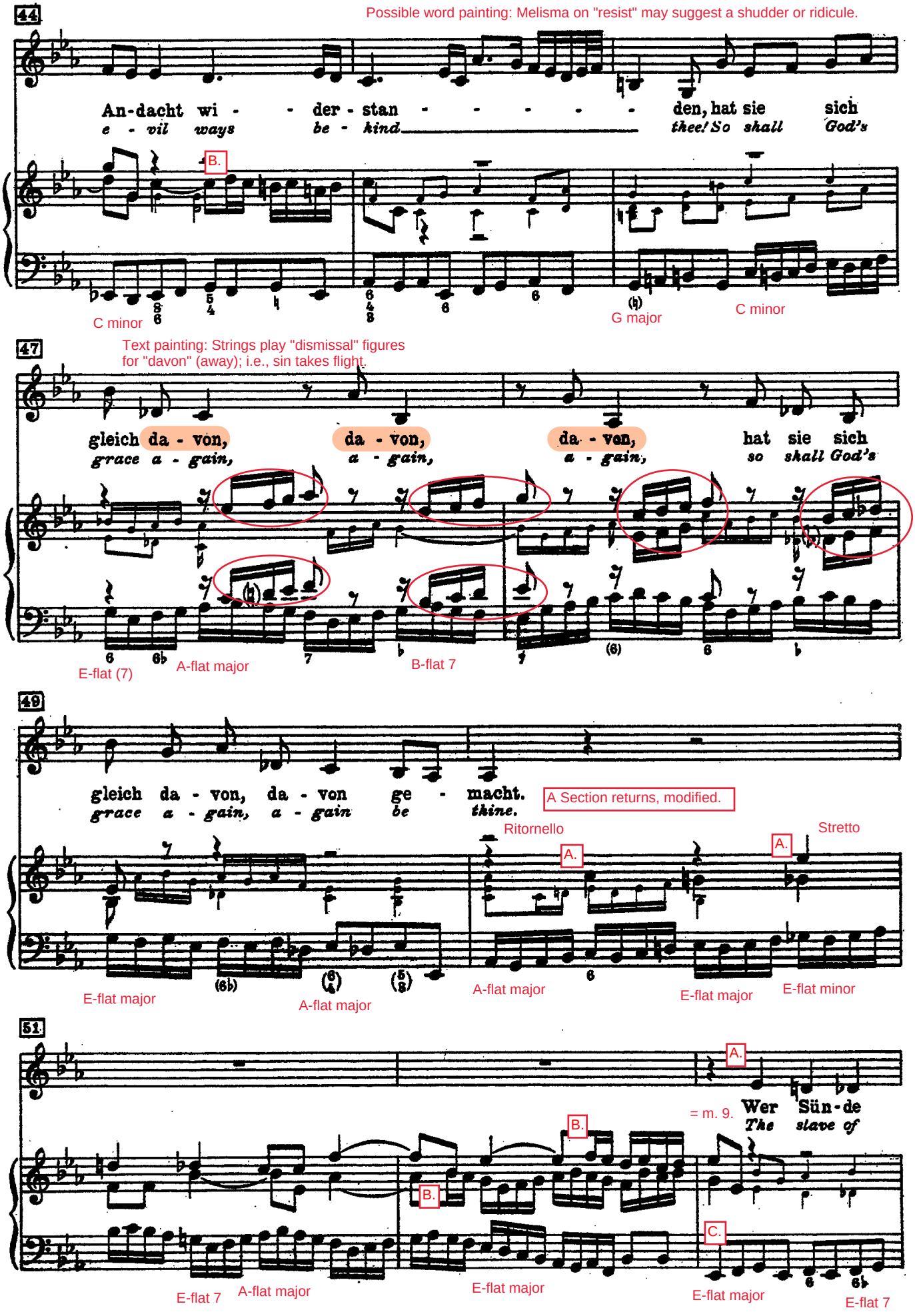

Possible allusion to John 8:44 [Jesus]: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

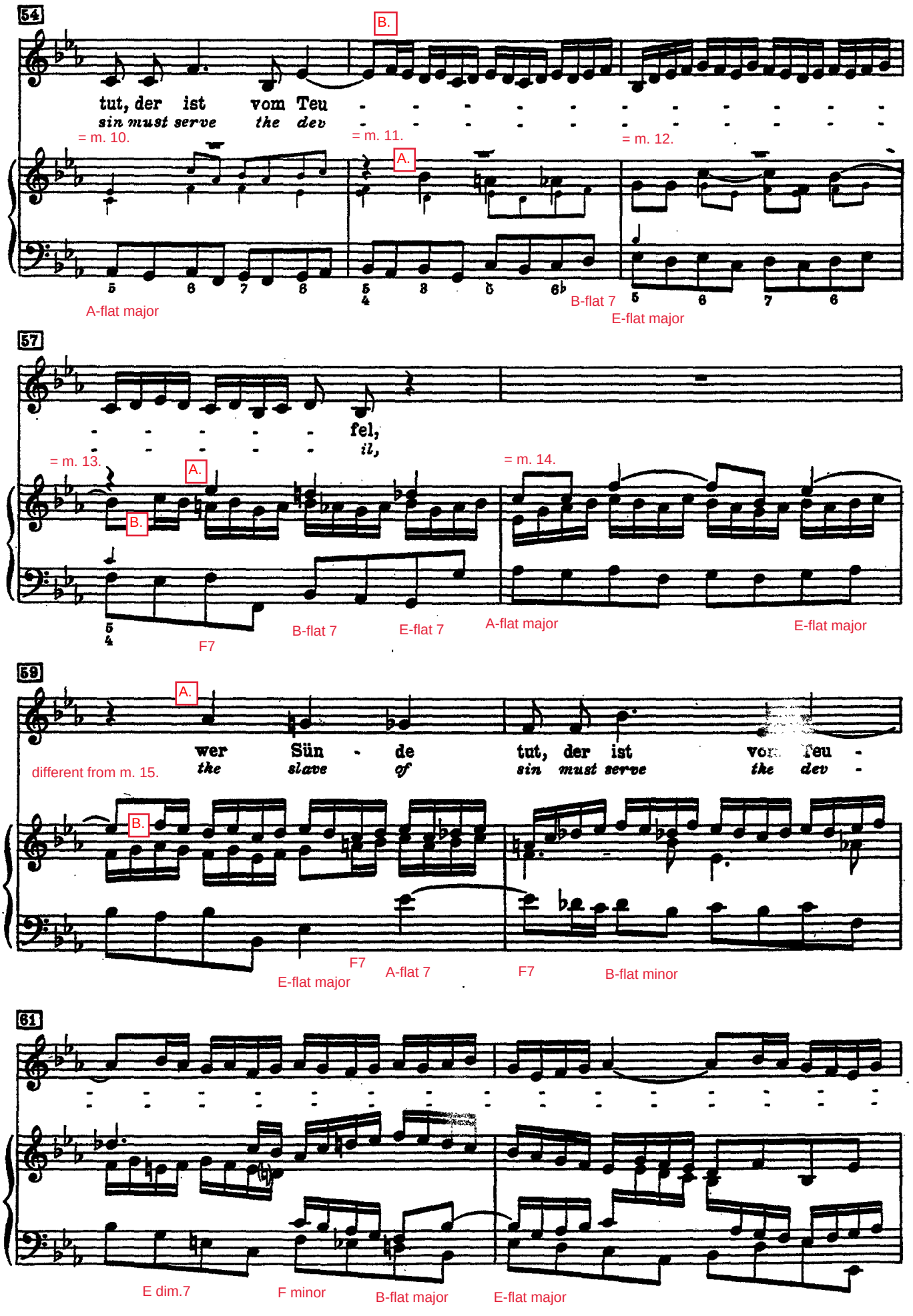


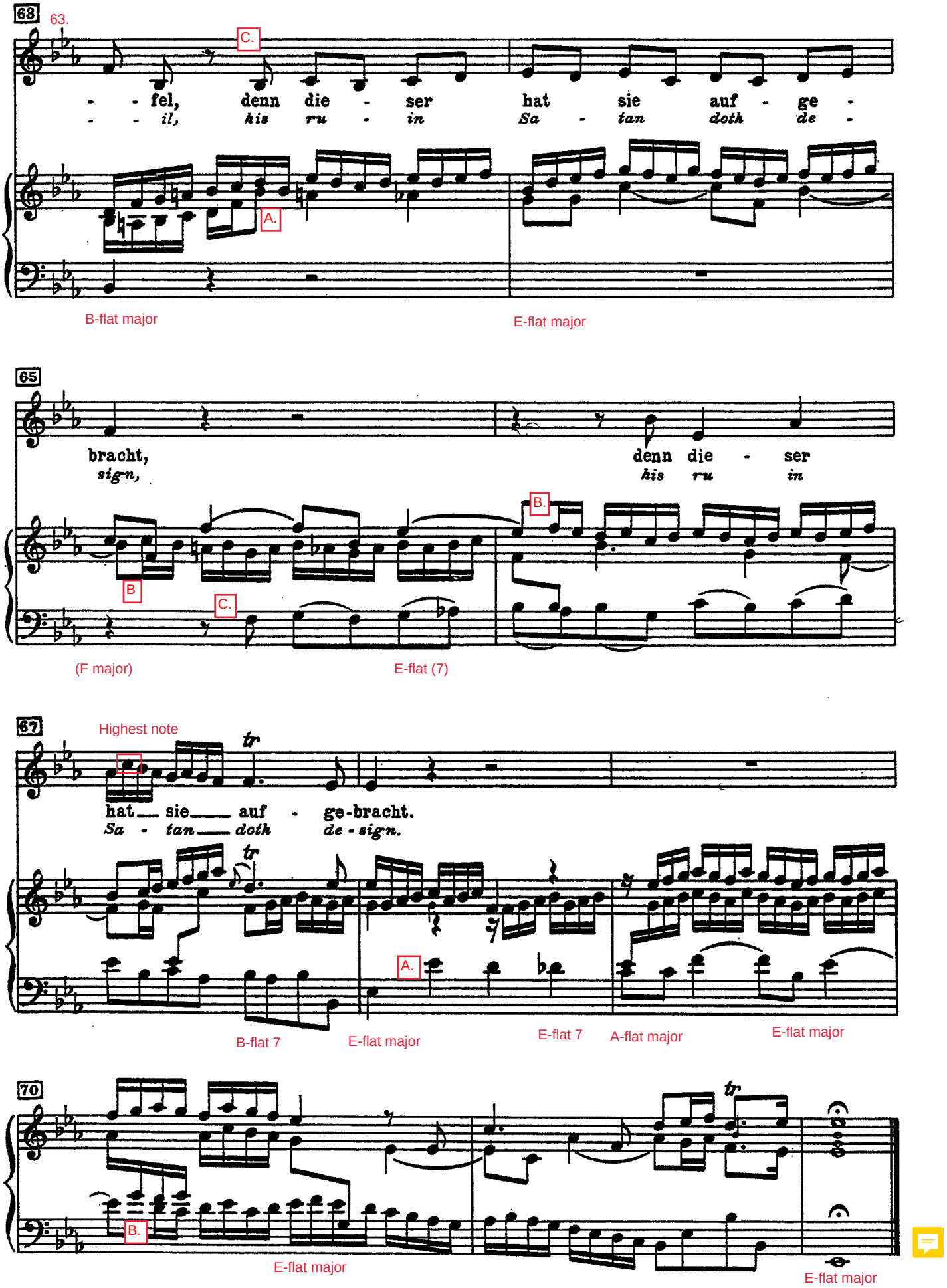




25
Vocal part is more free but instrumental lines continue with the fugal material.
ih - ren schnö - den Ban - den mit rech - ter An - dacht wi - der - stan -
sin - ful - chains that bind thee! A - mend, put e - vil ways be - hind
A.
Vlas
C.
E-flat major
C minor
D(7)
G7
C7
(F7)
G major
28
den, mit rech - ter An - dacht
thee! A - mend put e - vil
A.
Vlns
B.
C.
G minor
D7
G7
C7
F7
(B-flat 7)
30
30.
31.
wi - der - stan - den, hat sie sich gleich da -
ways be - hind thee! So shall God's grace a -
B.
(E-flat major)
C minor
G major
(A minor)
C minor
C major
32
Text painting: Strings play "dismissal" figures for "davon" (away); i.e., sin takes flight.
von, da - von, da - von, hat sie sich gleich da -
gain, a - gain, a - gain, so shall God's grace a -
F minor
G7
C minor
F7
B dim.
G7
C minor


34
von,
gain,
da-von ge - macht;
a-gain be thine;
A.
A. (Stretto)
B.
C minor
C minor
G minor
36
doch wenn man
then break the
B.
B.
C.
D7
G7
C(7)
D7
G minor
G major
G7
39
ih - re schnö - den Ban - den mit rech - ter An - dacht wi - der -
sin - fu chains that bind thee! A-mend, put e - vil ways be -
A.
C minor
C major
F minor
F7
B-flat 7
G minor
42
stan - - - - den, mit rech - ter
hind thee! A - mend put
B.
A.
C.
C(7)
F(7)
B-flat minor
C major
B dim.
F major
D dim.


44
Possible word painting: Melisma on "resist" may suggest a shudder or ridicule.
An-dacht wi - - der - stan - - - - - - den, hat sie sich
e - vil ways be - kind thee! So shall God's
B.
C minor
G major
C minor
47
Text painting: Strings play "dismissal" figures for "davon" (away); i.e., sin takes flight.
gleich da - von, da - von, da - von, hat sie sich
grace a - gain, a - gain, a - gain, so shall God's
E-flat (7)
A-flat major
B-flat 7
49
gleich da - von, da - von ge - macht.
grace a - gain, a - gain be thine.
A Section returns, modified.
Ritornello
A.
Stretto
A.
E-flat major
A-flat major
A-flat major
E-flat major
E-flat minor
51
A.
= m. 9.
Wer Sün - de
The slave of
B.
B.
C.
E-flat 7
A-flat major
E-flat major
E-flat major
E-flat 7


54
B.
tut, der ist vom Teu
sin must serve the dev
= m. 10.
= m. 11.
= m. 12.
A.
A-flat major
B-flat 7
E-flat major
57
fel,
il,
= m. 13.
A.
B.
= m. 14.
F7
B-flat 7
E-flat 7
A-flat major
E-flat major
59
A.
wer Sün - de tut, der ist vom Teu -
the slave of sin must serve the dev -
different from m. 15.
B.
E-flat major
F7
A-flat 7
F7
B-flat minor
61
E dim.7
F minor
B-flat major
E-flat major




Since Bach added chorales to other librettos by Lehms, Martin Petzoldt suggests adding the 16th stanza of the chorale "Jesu, meiner Seelen Wonne," a 19-stanza hymn by Martin Jan (ca. 1620–1682), using the tune "Jesu, der du meine Seele." Rudolf Lutz suggests the tune "Werde munter, mein Gemüte. (See side note .)