

Clavierübung III of J. S. Bach Theology in Notes and Numbers, Part 2

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Part I was published in the October issue of *THE DIAPASON*, pp. 22–25.

Wir glauben all' an einen Gott [We all believe in one God] (BWV 680–681)

The arrangement of the chorale *Wir glauben all' an einen Gott*, the Protestant version of the Credo, opens a series of dramatic chorale preludes in the *Clavierübung III*. Their themes are built on the minor keys and gravitate around the interval of the fifth.

In this piece the fugal upper voices are contrasted against a melodic line in the bass that occurs seven times. (Example 9) This melody is based on a leap of a fourth followed by a downward move within the octave and displays a structural similarity to the theme of the so-called Dorian Fugue (BWV 538).⁵⁵ The ostinato motif appears altogether six times in the pedal; once (the sixth appearance) in modified form on the manuals: there only the beginning of the motif appears, repeated three times.

Not just the relationship (6 + 1) in the use of this striking melody is important, but also the fact that its form is changed in the one time it is used on the manuals. Naturally, this begs the question as to the purpose of this change. We have here possibly an allusion to the Old Testament injunction: Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but one day must be reserved for prayer and spiritual needs. From here stem the characteristics of one of the developments: an elevation of the *tessitura*, the use of only upward leaps, the softening of the harshness of the harmonic minor, and finally the *heterolepsis* figure used in the upper voices.

The manual voices are developed out of the beginning of the melody of the chorale *Wir glauben all' an einen Gott*. The first four notes of this motif in a tonal answer form a musical rhetorical figure, often encountered in the works of Bach, which Boleslav Javorsky called the *predestination motif*.⁵⁶ The origin of this motif lies in the chorale melody *Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh' allzeit* [What my God wills may always happen] and is usually used by the composer as a culminant, dramatic or recapitulating figure (Fugue in G Minor, BWV 542, Fugue in A Minor, BWV 543, etc.). The whole musical fabric of this chorale prelude is shot through with this *predestination motif*.

Towards the end of the composition, Bach quotes in the tenor, first in its entirety, the first line of the *cantus firmus* (bars 89–98). Typically, the subsequent figure in the pedal that accompanies the chorale melody is enlarged, not only in its range (two octaves), but also in the number of notes (to 43—CREDO). One can also hardly describe it as a coincidence that the work has 100 bars: Bach could

not have found a better numerological symbol to underscore the idea of “We all believe in one God.”

If we had the task of finding within Bach's output a work for organ where the dramatic element was more pronounced, we could, paradoxically, hardly do better than choose the small 15-bar *manualiter* fughetto on the chorale melody *Wir glauben all' an einen Gott* in the *Clavierübung III*. Written in Handel style,⁵⁷ it is very chromatic. The traditional double dotting, the richly ornamented musical fabric, the use of characteristic rhetorical figures—*tiratas*—all combine to sharpen up the harmonic impact of this three-voice fughetto to the highest degree.

The high point of the piece comes in the 12th bar, which results in the interesting proportions of 4:5.⁵⁸ The density of chords in this bar is a rare example in Bach's organ works. (Example 10) The diminished seventh on the strong beat contains seven notes. The following diminished seventh from D sharp–C contains six notes, which together makes 13 notes—most certainly another numerological symbol and one that needs no explanation. The impact of the intensive harmonies is strengthened by “talking pauses” and the declamatory answers on the “weak” beats of the bars. The intonations from the introduction (*viola da gamba solo*) of the aria *Es ist vollbracht* from the *St. John Passion* (BWV 245) can be heard in the music. (Example 11)

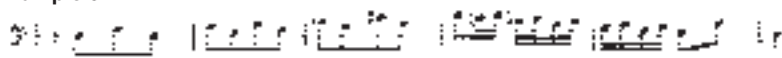
The descending seconds in Lombardic rhythm, with articulation marks written out in full by the composer (bar 11), the key role of the striking diminished seventh from D sharp–C at the high point of the work, and the key chosen—this is by no means a complete list of the methods the composer has used to create a smooth transition to the subsequent part of the composition.

Vater unser im Himmelreich [Our Father in Heaven] (BWV 682–683)

In the extensive arrangement of the chorale melody *Vater unser im Himmelreich* we encounter an example of a trio that is from time to time expanded to five voices by means of the *cantus firmus* in canon. This is one of the rare works of Bach full of articulation marks. Thoroughness of articulation shows how important this aspect of organ playing was for the Leipzig cantor.

Already, the choice of key says a great deal about the associative structure of this music. E minor is the key of the opening chorus of the *St. Matthew Passion* (BWV 244), the *Crucifixus* from the *Mass in B Minor* (BWV 232), the Prelude and Fugue for organ (BWV 548), the chorale prelude *Da Jesus an*

Example 9



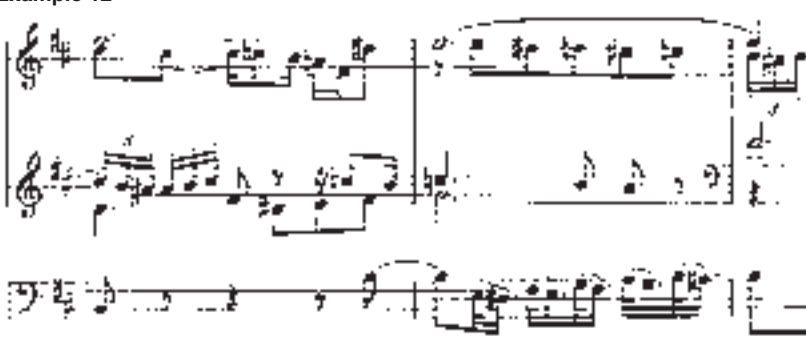
Example 10



Example 11



Example 12



Example 13



dem Kreuze stund (BWV 621) from the *Orgelbüchlein*, and many other works in which Bach created an atmosphere of grief, sorrow, and misfortune.

The narrative flow of the music in the greater chorale *Vater unser im Himmelreich* creates an atmosphere of stillness and calm, and invites the hearer to intense prayer. The movement in seconds in Lombardic rhythm⁵⁹ is akin to the sighs of a humble soul turned towards God. Time moves gently, so as not to disturb the state of intimate prayer.

This composition is literally suffused with thematic symbolism. Allow me to name just a few (following B. Javorsky): the descending third – a *symbol of grief*; a smooth chromatic movement of 5 to 7 notes – *pain*; a progression in triplets – *fatigue, weariness*; a movement along the notes of a first inversion – a *symbol of inevitable realization*; and so on.

The musical fabric of the composition resembles the tenor aria *Wo wird in diesem Jammertale für meinen Geist die Zuflucht sein?* [Where will my spirit find its refuge in this vale of tears?] from the cantata *Ach, lieben Christen, seid getrost* [Ah dear Christians, be comforted] (BWV 114), which Bach completed in Leipzig in 1724. Without a doubt there is an inner connection between the two works. The text of the aria, especially the treatment of the key word “*Jammertal*” [“vale of tears” in German] can give the performer the right feeling for the interpretation of the greater chorale prelude *Vater unser im Himmelreich*.

Another interesting detail of the work is the movement in seconds in Lombardic rhythm in the pedal. This occurs only once in the whole work, at bar 41 (JSBACH), an allusion to the composer's unseen participation in the prayer to God the Father. (Example 12)

The intricately crafted rhythms of the greater chorale prelude *Vater unser im Himmelreich* give way in the manual version to flowing linear movement in sextuplets. This sharp contrast has not gone unnoticed by scholars. “As complicated as the rhythms in the large Our-Father prelude may be, so simple is the calm flow of the 16th notes in the manuals version . . .” wrote Christoph Albrecht.⁶⁰ An interesting explanation for this contrast has been put forward by Albert Clement, who connects the greater chorale prelude with the text of the fourth verse of Luther's chorale *Vater unser im Himmelreich*,⁶¹ and the smaller prelude with the following verses (5–8). The fourth verse appeals to God's patience in a time of sorrow, while verses 5–8 speak of trust in His compassion and assistance.⁶²

The placid wave motion of the accompanying voices in the manuals version of the chorale prelude *Vater unser im Himmelreich* gently prepares us for the stormy motion of the 16th notes in the greater chorale prelude *Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam* [Christ, our Lord, to Jordan came] as the following section of the *Clavierübung III*.

Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam [Christ, our Lord, to Jordan came] (BWV 684–685)

The greater chorale prelude *Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam* presents us once again with something quite out of the ordinary. This is the first occurrence in the whole work of the *cantus firmus* being transferred to the pedal in a high register. The composer indulges here in musical picture painting: the 16th-note runs produce a sort of *perpetuum mobile* and create the impression of waves on the Jordan. The music is dominated by

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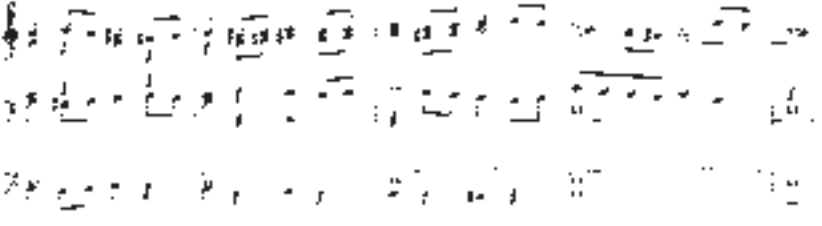
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Example 14



Example 15



Example 16



an atmosphere of waiting for the miracle of God's appearance and with it, the forgiveness of sins through the ritual of baptism. (Example 13)

Attempts have been made by various authors to see in the upper voices a dialogue between the Savior and St. John the Baptist,⁶³ a view that I personally do not find very convincing. Built on the symbolic motifs of the *Cross* and *Willingness to Sacrifice*,⁶⁴ the dialogue in the upper voices is often syncopated or transformed into a typical Bachian *motion*. It does not seem in the least to be associated with the dialogue between God's Incarnation and His forerunner, but rather serves, as does the stormy motion of the bass, to create a state of what I would call "joyful excitement"—an atmosphere that is typical of many iconographic depictions of the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

The appearance of the Holy Trinity—as the Spirit in the form of a dove descending from heaven and as the supernatural light surrounding Christ at His baptism in the waters of the Jordan—is present in this prelude at the deeper level of mystical numerological symbolism. The *cantus firmus* appears nine times against the three-voiced accompaniment ($9 \times 3 = 27$), while the total number of bars in the prelude is 81 (27×3).

Each appearance of the *cantus firmus* is built on a particular number of notes: in four cases it is nine notes, in the other five cases it is eight. And they occur in a strict sequence: $9 + 8 + 9 + 8$; $8 + 9 + 8 + 9 + 8$. The symbolism of the numbers 3, 9, 27, 81 focuses our attention on the picture of the Holy Trinity, while the number 8 is associated with the heavenly *chronos* or with the Coming of the Messiah.⁶⁵

The legitimacy of the numerical proportions in the greater chorale prelude is borne out by the numerological symbolism of the manual fugato in three voices on *Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam*. The fugato is written in simple triple time and has 27 bars ($27 \times 3 = 81$). The main theme—the first line of the chorale—occurs three times in the original and three times in the inversion, and each time it is accompanied by a counter-melody based on thematic material in diminution, which forms a kind of canon. (Example 14)

In the opinion of Christoph Albrecht, this is a musical representation of the Gospel words of St. John the Baptist: "He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).⁶⁶ It is worth mentioning that the bridges in the fugato (bars 8–10 and 18–20) have an evident three-part structure containing the countersubject (= the diminished theme).

All in all, the composer introduces the theme a total of 14 times (three times the original theme, three times inverted, and eight times diminished).⁶⁷ The concluding development of the theme in its original form (bass in bar 20) has been slightly altered through the introduction of the *Willingness to Sacrifice* motif as

an *anacrusis*. This results in interesting proportions for the presentation of the thematic material: $2 + 1 + 3 + 8$. It is not difficult to see that these numbers represent a numerical version of the name of the composer (BACH).

Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir [Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee] (BWV 686–687)

The only organ work of Bach written in true six parts with double pedal is the chorale prelude on Psalm 130 (129) *Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir*—a further example of the *stile antico* in his work. Each verse of this monumental penitential chorale,⁶⁸ welling up out of the depths of the heart, is introduced in the fugal-like exposition that concludes each time with the *cantus firmus* in the upper pedal voice. This gives the work, written in the best tradition of J. Pachelbel, the form of an unbroken chain of seven fugues, corresponding to the number of verses of the chorale.

Albert Schweitzer's attention had already been drawn to the "motif (rhythm) of joy" that first greets one in the initial phrases of the countersubject. As the music develops, this symbolic motif is further elaborated and at the end totally dominates the musical fabric. (Example 15) Schweitzer proposed a dogmatic interpretation for its presence: "Bach . . . is trying to represent the Lutheran doctrine of repentance, according to which all true repentance leads of itself to the joyful certainty of salvation."⁶⁹

Schweitzer's observation is, of course, interesting and not without subtlety, but in my opinion one is dealing here less with joy, but rather with the cleansing power of repentance and the resulting confidence of the penitent in his own future. The motif under consideration conveys just this feeling of confidence.

What motives led Bach to introduce the chorale prelude *Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir* into the *Clavierübung III* at all? Penance was not a component of the Ordinary of the old Mass, although it had been included in the liturgy in Saxony since 1601. Neither was penance dealt with by Luther in his Great Catechism, although he sometimes mentioned it along with Baptism and the Eucharist as one of the Sacraments. This was apparently the decisive argument for Bach to place two fantasies on *Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir* between the parts relating to Baptism and the Eucharist.

Numerological symbolism plays an important role in both works. As has already been said, the seven fugues that make up this work correspond to each of the seven verses of the chorale. The *cantus firmus* that crowns each fugue always consists of nine notes, whereas it is interesting to note that it first occurs in the ninth bar. In addition, the length of the *cantus firmus* from its first to last note always has the same length of eight half-bars.

This changelessness of the *cantus firmus*, with its connection to the numbers

nine, eight, and seven is obviously meant to signify the objective, almost unearthly quality of the beneficial cleansing power that flows over the penitent sinner. An additional indication can be found in the fact that at each occurrence the *cantus firmus* is first woven into the musical structure only after the completion of the exposition with its five voices. (We recall that the number five symbolizes "sensual Mankind.")

Our attention is also drawn to the relationship between the number seven (seven verses of the chorale and the seven fugues) and the number five (the five-part musical structure⁷⁰). These two numbers have an interesting internal proportion: $7:5 = 1.4$ (BACH). One could probably regard this as pure chance, were it not that these two numbers occur again within this work. The chorale prelude has 75 bars, where the number 75 is the numerological expression of the word ELEISON ($5 + 11 + 5 + 9 + 18 + 14 + 13$). The relevance of this cry for mercy in a work dealing with remorse can hardly be doubted.

It is characteristic that the *manualliter* version of the chorale *Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir* displays the same numerological symbolism as the greater version. A slight change in the rhythmical structure makes the initial motif of the theme correspond to the eighth fugue of the *Ariadne Musica Neo-Organedum Per Viginti* by Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer (ca. 1660–1746).

Bach's work impresses us by its architecture. Just as in the first chorale prelude, we encounter an unbroken chain of fugues that treat the seven verses of the chorale one after the other, both in its tonic form and its inversion, where each is brought to a close by the statement of the *cantus firmus* in the soprano. This results in seven fugues. Six of them are of the same length. The *cantus firmus* occurs after the fifth bar and lasts for eight bars. But here we encounter an interesting new development: after the *cantus firmus* has run its course, Bach does not immediately begin with the following fugato, but each time inserts an

extra bar as a sort of résumé. Thus the six units have the following structure: $5 + 8 + 1$. It is not difficult to see that the résumé thus occurs in the 14th (BACH) bar of the appropriate unit.⁷¹

The last and seventh unit differs in its structure from the preceding six, and introduces a proportion that we have already encountered in the greater chorale prelude on *Credo* ($6+1$). After it has started as all the preceding units (five bars of fugato without the *cantus firmus*, followed by eight bars with the *cantus firmus*), this seventh unit has instead of the "Bach résumé" an extension of the second *cantus* part for a further five bars, resulting in the new proportion of $5 + (8 + 5)$. It is not difficult to see that this new proportion brings us close to the Golden Rule: $8:5 = 1.6$ whereas $13:8 = 1.625$. This is not altogether surprising. Thus when the composer understood the combination $6 + 1$ as the biblical command to labor for six days, but to keep the seventh as a Sabbath for your God, then it was appropriate that this "special" seventh day be not simply adorned with ordinary music, but be jewelled with golden tones!

Jesus Christus unser Heiland [Jesus Christ our Savior] (BWV 688–689)

The last two chorale preludes in the *Clavierübung III* deal with the events surrounding the Last Supper. Viewed from a cultural perspective, the iconography of this subject centers around two key moments. The first is the Transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. The second moment concerns the circumstances of Judas's betrayal.

The greater chorale prelude *Jesus Christus unser Heiland* is woven out of three voices. The *cantus firmus*, based on an intonation of fifth, is written out in long notes and appears in the pedal. The lively duet in the upper voices simultaneously spins out the three-note stepwise motif (according to Javorsky, a *motif of reconciliation*), both in its tonic form and its inversion. (Example 16)



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We have already encountered this characteristic method in the *Clavierübung III*: in the greater chorale prelude on *Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist*. Its use with quickened tempi produces a mood of agitation and worried concern. A special feature of the musical language is the frequent use of unprepared dissonances that heighten the sense of drama. Speaking personally, this music always conjures up for me Leonardo da Vinci's famous Milanese fresco of the Last Supper, where the disciples of Christ, unsettled by his prophecy of betrayal, turn to the Savior with just one question "Surely not I, Lord?" (St. Matthew 26:22).

The *cantus firmus* appears altogether four times in the pedal as the embodiment of Christ's serenity and his willingness to drink the Cup of his Passion. Its 44 notes are arranged as a pattern of 10 + 12 + 10 + 12. It would appear that the composer has applied this numerical pattern to emphasize the union of the Old Testament (the Law) and the New Testament (the Testament of Christ). Obviously, it is appropriate to remember at this point that St. Augustine considered the number twelve to be a symbol of the Church of Christ. The universal, catholic character of the Church is portrayed by the numerical symbol 144 (= 12x12). Note that the three-note *motif of reconciliation* in the manuals occurs exactly this many times in the musical texture of this composition.⁷²

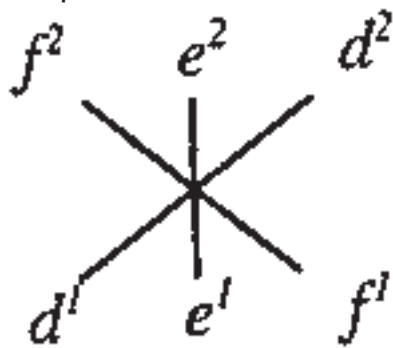
Another mysterious symbol is embedded in the score. When one connects the first and the sixth notes of the first bar, and the second and fifth notes, and the third and fourth notes (d1-d2, f2-f1, e1-e2) with a straight line, one produces a graphic figure which resembles the Greek letters X (Chi) and I (Iota) superimposed on each other. (Example 17)

This figure is the emblem of God made Man (Ιησους Χριστος – *Iesus Christos*), and one must assume that the composer intentionally built this motif into the structure of the chorale prelude, a chorale that begins with the words "*Jesus Christus unser Heiland*" [Jesus Christ our Savior]. Typically this emblem occurs 72 times within the work, something that can hardly be attributed to chance. In accordance with tradition, this symbolic number corresponds to the 72 biblical names of the Lord, 72 biblical angels, the 72 nations of the ancient world, and the 72 disciples that Jesus sent out to preach his gospel. The Old Testament book of Numbers tells of 72 elders who received the gift of prophecy from God (Numbers 11:24, 26).⁷³

The *manualiter* version of *Jesus Christus unser Heiland* (an extensive fugal composition in four voices) displays a very interesting feature—the placement of the theme does not match the metrical structure. The use of such a technique in the final chorale work of the *Clavierübung III* undoubtedly has good reasons. Perhaps Bach wanted to underline that the teachings of Christ have an eternal relevance that is not bound by the confines of physical time.

The theme of this fugue displays a striking structure. It consists of 13 notes⁷⁴ and is based on two elements, which

Example 17



have a significant structural function in the whole cycle: a leap over a fifth and a stepwise motif over a third. The first notes of the tonal answer replicate exactly the final cadence of the chorale *Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh' allzeit*, which (following Javorsky) we have interpreted as a *predestination motif*. (Example 18)

The countersubject is worked out with a *circulatio* figure that represents the *Cup of Sorrows*. The theme occurs 17 times altogether, with the final statement in augmentation. Bach undoubtedly considers the number 17 to be the union of ten and seven, especially as the eleventh statement is introduced by a longer bridge passage. The number ten is associated with the Law of the Old Testament (The Decalogue), while according to Werckmeister, the number seven is the symbol for purity and peace.

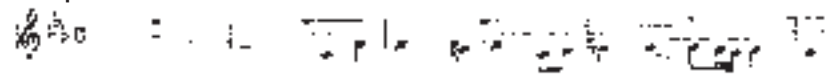
Thus one can summarize the conjunction of all these symbols as follows: The predestination from above (*predestination motif*) and the reconciliation prophesied in the Old Testament (*reconciliation motif*) through the suffering of Christ on the Cross (the *Cup of Sorrows motif*) purifies the fallen world (13) and gives it eternal peace and bliss (7).

Four Duets: E minor, F major, G major, A minor

Scholars agree that the four duets of the *Clavierübung III* are very difficult indeed to interpret. As Hermann Keller remarked, the duets are "so unique and in part so difficult to understand that one must almost be led to believe that Bach wished to express something very special, but no one has yet found the key to them."⁷⁵ And in fact the opinions of the experts concerning both the content and the meaning of these works are indeed very contradictory. Some of them are of the opinion that they should be played during the Eucharist, while others see them as symbolic representation of the four Gospels.⁷⁶ Albert Schweitzer is most probably the furthest removed from the truth with his opinion that they have only found their way into the *Clavierübung III* by mistake. He thus underestimates the significance of numerical symbolism within this work. Above all he did not "notice" that with the addition of the four duets the total number of works in the *Clavierübung III* reached the "cosmic" number of 27.

How does this music present itself? All four pieces are highly individual and represent the highest achievement within the development of the genre of keyboard music for two voices known as

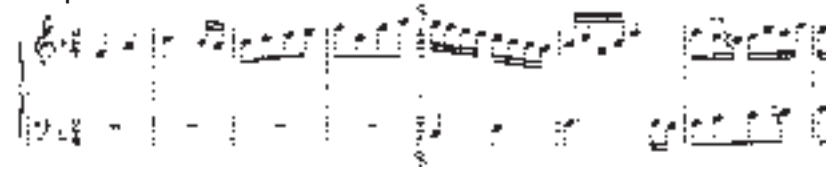
Example 18



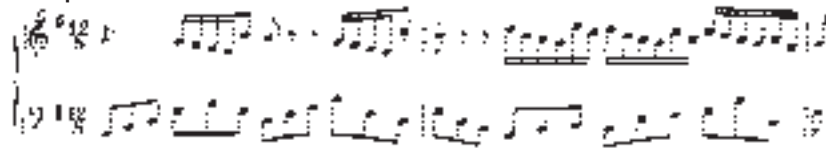
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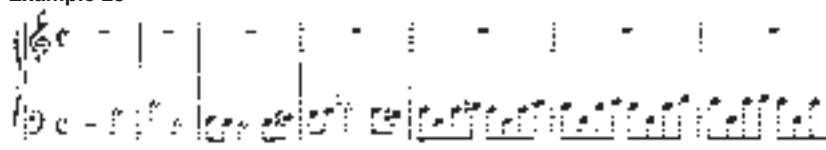
Example 20



Example 21



Example 23



inventions. They display no direct connection to the church chorales, but one is aware that while they have an element of tone painting it would not be illogical to interpret them as representations of the four material elements of this world: fire, air, water, and earth. Indeed, just this sort of interpretation was first suggested by Rudolf Steglich.⁷⁷

Let us now look at the musical design of the duets.

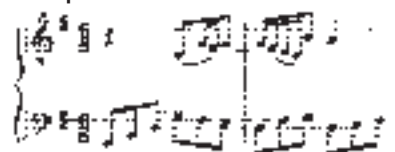
The duet in E minor (BWV 802) is pure energy. Whole rivers of fire flow in the rapid succession of 32nd notes and the broken line of the syncopated motif recalls tongues of fire. The jagged melisma, the semitone movement within the range of diminished thirds: all reinforce a pervading feeling of tension. An almost pagan cult of fire dominates this music. (Example 19)

The F major duet (BWV 803) is built on the idea of contrast. The sphere of air is represented as a contrast of light and dark elements. The main theme, the embodiment of light, occurs in a major key in both the exposition and the recapitulation. The central part gives the impression of sudden twilight, which shrouds all life and transforms everything into a ghostly world of shadows. The contrast of major and minor suggests conflict—the elements of light struggle to free themselves from the chains of the mythological shadow world. (Example 20)

The G major duet (BWV 804) paints a picture of a body of water sparkling in

the rays of the morning sun. Murmuring and iridescent flowing passages stirred by a light breeze create the impression of an unending stream of flowing water, magically calling to us by its freshness and purity. (Example 21) The musical texture of this work shows a high degree of similarity to the aria *Von der Welt verlang ich nichts* [From the world I nought desire] as the seventh part of the cantata *Sehet, welch eine Liebe hat uns der Vater erzeiget* [See what love the Father has bestowed on us], 1 John 3:1 (BWV 64). (Example 22)

Example 22



The duet in A minor (BWV 805) has a different character. Behind the slow unfolding of its ideas, behind the gravity of its utterances one can discern an unbending internal force that holds everything in its thrall and directs all things. The extended, epically expanding theme strives to embrace all earthly things. The rocklike solidity of this musical picture calls to mind the immovable foundation of the earth. (Example 23)

Unlike Rudolf Steglich, Albert Clement suggested another approach. He

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