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Musica theologica
**Religious Aspects of Die Kunst der Fuge,
Musikalisches Opfer, and Goldberg Variations
of J. S. Bach**

Summary: Today, a reference to Johann Sebastian Bach as a “theological musician and musical theologian” (Robin A. Leaver) is no longer surprising. The discovery of theology in the composer’s religious vocal/instrumental works or ones which are purely instrumental, but have religious titles, is not surprising, either. However, musicians increasingly suggest that Bach wrote musical theology also in his purely instrumental works, which have “always” been considered secular. The author of the article outlines theological interpretations of three such works dating to the last period of Johann Sebastian’s work: Die Kunst der Fuge, Musikalisches Opfer i Goldberg-Variationen.

Keywords: the last period of Bach's work, secular instrumental music, theology, The Revelation of St. John the Divine, theology of the cross, Christology

Streszczenie: *Musica theologica*. Religijne aspekty Die Kunst der Fuge, Musikalisches Opfer and Goldberg-Variationen J.S. Bacha

Dzisiaj już nie dziwi nazywanie Jana Sebastiana Bacha „teologiem muzycznym i muzykiem teologicznym” (Robin A. Leaver). Nie dziwi też odkrywanie teologii w jego religijnych utworach wokalnie-instrumentalnych czy czysto instrumentalnych, ale opatrzonych religijnymi tytułami. Coraz częściej muzykolodzy jednak sugerują, że Bach pisał muzyczną teologię także w dziełach czysto instrumentalnych, które „od zawsze” uchodziły za świeckie. Autor niniejszego artykułu prezentuje zarysy teologicznych interpretacji trzech takich dzieł, pochodzących z ostatniego okresu twórczości Jana Sebastiana: Die Kunst der Fuge, Musikalisches Opfer i Goldberg-Variationen.

Słowa kluczowe: ostatni okres twórczości Bacha, świecka muzyka instrumentalna, teologia, Objawienie św. Jana, teologia krzyża, chrystologia

Introduction

Referring to contemporary renditions of Johann Sebastian Bach's long-forgotten instrumental cyclical works dating to the last decade of his life, including *Canonic Variations*, *The Musical Offering*, and *The Art of Fugue*, Malcolm Boyd wrote: "It may even be that the laudable and successful attempts to remove them from dusty shelves and make them regularly available in recital programmes has actually obscured their real nature. For while it may be true that Bach wrote them with particular instruments in mind, this does not mean that performance is intrinsic to the music, [...] to the score reader, able to follow and ponder on their cold logic, they offer an insight into the mysteries of infinity every bit as teasing in its mathematical beauty as Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. [...] only through study can we hope to arrive at a complete perception of it, and after study contemplation; for it exists in a world far removed from the *musica humana* of our own, where music, mathematics, and philosophy are one"¹.

If, to me, Boyd's interpretation lacks anything, then this is the word "theology". After all, we are increasingly aware that the instrumental music of Bach's last period of work hides in itself not only mathematics and philosophy, but also *scientia sacra*². This means, however, that this music may belong to *musica humana*, and in a double sense to boot: as music talking about the most important human affairs (theology), and as understood by Boethius (5th-6th century AD). It was the author of *De institutione musica* who used the notion to describe the inaudible music that really sounds in the human being, one tied with divine threads with the equally inaudible, but real music of the celestial spheres, with the music of God Himself, which people use as

¹ M. Boyd, *Bach*, Oxford University Press, New York 2000, p. 227.

² See e.g.: R. A. Leaver, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Theological Musician and Musical Theologian*, "Bach" No. 1, 2000, pp. 17–33; R. A. Leaver, "Concio et cantio". *Kontrapunkt teologii i muzyki w tradycji luteranckiej od Praetoriusa do Bacha* ['Concio et Cantio'. *The Counterpoint of Theology and Music in Lutheran Perceptions from Praetorius to Bach*], translated by S. Zabieglńska, W. Bońkowski, "Muzyka" 2007, No 4, pp. 5–24; J. Pelikan, *Bach among the Theologians*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene 2003; M. Marissen, *Bach and God*, Oxford University Press, New York 2016; D. Zager (ed.), *Music and Theology. Essays in Honor of Robin A. Leaver*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham – Toronto – Plymouth 2007.

a model to create a *musica instrumentalis* that can be perceived through the senses³.

It was necessary to recall Boethius here because of his connection with Bach through the great heritage of the Pythagorean concept of music. It constituted the basis of the activity of the elite German Society of the Musical Sciences (*Societät der musicalischen Wissenschaften*) founded in 1738 by Lorenz Christoph Mizler, a student and friend of the cantor from Leipzig. Johann Sebastian joined it nine years later, but he was interested in its activity from the very beginning and maintained contact with its members⁴. The metaphysical concept of music as a sort of “concealed theology”⁵ was very close to this noble assembly of practitioners and theoreticians of the art of sound. Christoph Wolff pointed out that “for Bach, theological and musical scholarship were two sides of the same coin: the search for divine revelation, or the quest for God”⁶. Purely instrumental cyclical works dating to the last period of Johann Sebastian’s work, such as *The Art of Fugue*, *The Musical Offering* and *Goldberg Variations* are very special examples of such theological quests and searches.

1. *Sola gratia*

Johann Sebastian Bach (1675–1750), a cantor of the Lutheran Church, began to work on Die Kunst der Fuge towards the end of the 1730s and the beginning of the 1740s, and was about to finish writing the work in 1749 – although, as is believed, he did not

³ See: G. Cattin, *Music of the Middle Ages*, translated by P. Botterill, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge – New York 1984, vol. I, pp. 157–165; D. Burakowski, *Muzyka – nauka czy sztuka? [Music – Science or Art?]*, “Sztuka i Filozofia” 2008, vol. 32, pp. 41–47.

⁴ See: A. Miłka, „Искусство фуги” И. С. Баха: к реконструкции и интерпретации, Композитор, Санкт–Петербург 2009, pp. 29–35. See Mark E. Bonds, *Absolute Music: the History of an Idea*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014, pp. 90–98.

⁵ See: E. Chafe, *Allegorical Music: The “Symbolism” of Tonal Language in the Bach Canons*, “The Journal of Musicology” No. 4, 1984, pp. 357–358; R. A. Leaver, “*Concio et cantio*”, p. 13.

⁶ Ch. Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician*, W. W. Norton, New York 2000, p. 335. Cf. J. Bramorski, *Teologiczno–estetyczne wyznaczniki sakralności dzieła muzycznego [Theological and Esthetic Determinants of the Musical Work as Sacra]*, „Pro Musica Sacra” 2011, No 11, p. 15.

manage to complete it.⁷ In 1984, Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht presented a theological interpretation of the masterpiece⁸. The German musicologist suggested that the work can be a musical illustration of the fundamental Christian doctrine, in particular dear to Lutheranism, on the redemption of the sinful human being owing to God's grace rather than human works (*sola gratia*)⁹. At the same time, the author added an important remark that continues to remain topical and also applies to other attempts at a theological interpretation of Bach's purely instrumental works: "I freely admit that this interpretation can never be proved. In fact, such an interpretation hardly dares venture out into today's world. Ideas like this are viewed with great suspicion and are often immediately discounted on the grounds that they present an ideologically corrupted analysis of Bach's intentions"¹⁰.

A key role in the Eggebrechtian theological interpretation of *Die Kunst der Fuge*, a cycle of fourteen contrapuncti and four canons in D-minor, is played by the musical-rhetorical and symbolic-numeric aspects of the last contrapunctus. This movement currently comprises three fugues, each with the subject derived from the ground theme – the subject of the first contrapunctus of the entire cycle. All four of them were to meet together in the ending of the work, but Bach's plans in this scope were thwarted by his severe disease and death.

Eggebrecht begins his reflections with the theme of the third fugue, which takes the form of B-A-C-H-C#-D. In this theme, Johann Sebastian musically inscribed his family surname: B-A-C-H. The German musicologist suggests that the motif B-A-C-H is not only – as is commonly assumed – Johann Sebastian's signature placed under *The Art of Fugue*, but also serves to express his, Bach's standing above his grave, hope for salvation solely through God's grace.

⁷ A summary presentation of the state of research on *The Art of Fugue* during the last few decades is offered by Paul Walker in: *Counterpoint, Canons and the Late Works*, in: R. A. Leaver (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach*, Routledge, London – New York 2017, pp. 392–397.

⁸ H. H. Eggebrecht, *Bachs Kunst der Fuge. Erscheinung und Deutung*, Piper, München 1984. I used the following English translation: *J.S. Bach's "The Art of Fugue"*. *The Work and its Interpretation*, translated by J.L. Prater, Ames 1993.

⁹ See: M. Hintz, *Sola*, [in:] T. Gadacz, B. Milerski (eds.), *Religia. Encyklopedia PWN [Religion. An Encyclopaedia of the State Scientific Publishing House]*, Vol. IX, Warszawa 2003 (electronic version); idem, *Główne rysy duchowości ewangelickiej – nurt luterański [The Main Features of Evangelical Spirituality – the Lutheran Approach]*, "Przegląd Religioznawczy" 2012, No. 2, pp. 145–156.

¹⁰ H. H. Eggebrecht, *J.S. Bach's "The Art of Fugue"*, p. 9.

It is as if the composer said: “I desire to reach, and am in the process of reaching, toward the T o n i c – I am identified with it”¹¹. The key role in this interpretation is played by the musical-rhetorical figure used by Bach – a double discant clausula consisting in the repetition of the two final notes of the theme – C sharp - D: “In fact, d is both the starting pitch and goal pitch of the overall musical structure in the work as a whole. Therefore, the addition of a *double discant clausula* to the pitches B-A-C-H in the third subject of the closing fugue is very significant”¹². In the Baroque doctrine of musical-rhetorical figures (*Figurenlehre*), every repetition of a fragment of melody or an element of harmony stresses its significance. Simultaneously, this clausula creates a musical-rhetorical figure called *polysyndeton*, in which a repetition of the same motif strengthens the expression of the melody. “Bach also gradually increases the durational emphasis of the structural pitches within the complete cadence figure. [...] Because Bach connected the pitches B-A-C-H to this emphatic cadential process, I cannot believe that he only intended to say, 'I composed this.' Rather, appending the double discant clausula to the B-A-C-H motto seems to say, 'I am identified with the T o n i c and it is my desire to reach it.' Interpreted more broadly, this statement could read: 'Like you, I am human; I am in need of salvation; I am certain in the hope of that’”¹³.

Eggebrecht stresses the significance of the chromatics of the third theme and assumes that it, too, has a rhetorical function: the diatonic material of both this fragment and the entire cycle of *Die Kunst der Fuge*, indicates the perfect nature of God (German *Sein*), while the chromatic material, in turn – the sinful human condition (German *Dasein*). The subject of the fugue is confined to the ambitus of a perfect fourth, as these six notes, starting with the lowest, and ending with the highest, have a markedly chromatic form: A, B, H, C, C#, D. Therefore, being chromatic, the theme belongs entirely and completely to the human, sinful sphere that needs redemption.

At the same time, the first subject of the last contrapunctus comprises seven notes: D-A-G-F-G-A-D, and is purely diatonic. As such, it is an embodiment of permanence, stability and internal peace, thus also indicating the nature of God¹⁴. Eggebrecht also sees a theological meaning of the first theme

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

in the number of notes – seven – that comprise the theme, and which he interprets – in the spirit of the Baroque – symbolically. Seven is therefore a holy, perfect number, turning one’s eyes towards the divine. As it is such in the first theme, it highlights the divine *Sein* even stronger.

The second theme of the last contrapunctus: a brisk, vigorous and turbulent theme, comprises 41 notes and the German musicologist suggests that this number has a symbolic sense as well. A popular feature in Baroque music was gematria (numerology), in which the subsequent natural numbers were assigned to the subsequent letters of the alphabet (the Latin or German one): thus, letter A was the equivalent of 1, B – 2, C – 3, D – 4..., H – 8..., I/J – 9..., S – 18, etc. The number 41, which – just like its reversal, the number 14 – Johann Sebastian often used in his compositions (the number of bars, notes, repetitions, etc.), is an equivalent of his name: J-S-B-A-C-H (14 being the equivalent of B-A-C-H). Eggebrecht interprets the second theme, with its briskness and vigorousness and the symbolic identification with the composer, as Johann Sebastian’s life, his existence directed towards the ultimate purpose – *sola gratia* redemption, which is expressed in the subsequent, third theme, to which the second theme heads¹⁵.

According to Bach’s *Obituary* worded by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel and his son-in-law Johann Friedrich Agricola, Johann Sebastian planned the last contrapunctus of *The Art of Fugue* as a mirror fugue¹⁶. This form was already given to contrapuncti 12 and 13 of the cycle, but the Leipzig cantor desired to complete *Die Kunst der Fuge*, his *magnum opus*, with a fugue of a mirror “crowning glory” of fugal art in the times of the Baroque. To Eggebrecht, such a form of contrapunctus also expresses its theological nature: “The two fugues of the mirror-invertible pair are totally different from each other, but are also completely contained in one another. The musical phenomenon is such that neither one of the fugues in a mirror pair trespasses on the ground of the other. The mutually exclusive yet highly interdependent relationship between the members of a mirror-fugue pair is not unlike the Lutheran understanding of

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

¹⁶ “Mirror Canon, Mirror Fugue. Canon or fugue in which the parts (voices) and intervals appear in the score simultaneously both the right way up and upside down, as if a mirror lay between them” (*Mirror Canon, Mirror Fugue*, in: M. Kennedy, J. Bourne, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*, Oxford University Press, New York 2004, p. 482.

the relationship between the redeemed 'human creation' and the 'Creator'. Moreover, this state of redemption is not considered to depend upon human works, but it proceeds directly out of the Creator's mercy. A mirror fugue can thus be considered a symbol which represents an effortless transfer of security from one member of the pair to the other. Therefore, the final fugue, could actually be symbolic of the Christian doctrine of 'salvation by grace'¹⁷.

2. Apocalyptic revelation

Can *Die Kunst der Fuge* have a connection with the Bible? Yes, it can – answers the Russian musicologist Anatoly Milka¹⁸, who relates the work with the Revelation to John, suggesting an apocalyptic starting point for a new reflection on Bach's masterpiece.

Milka argues that only the composer's serious eye disease in the last years of his life and his death in 1750 prevented Johann Sebastian from completing the final version of *The Art of Fugue*, a plan of which – a different one to that in the earlier versions – had already been prepared. What plays a key role in it is the symbolism of several numbers:

14: an equivalent of Bach's surname;

7: the perfect number, particularly important in the Bible;

4: a symbol of the Earth (four cardinal directions, four earthly classical elements) and the material reality;

3: a symbol of the spirit, spiritual life, and the number of the Holy Trinity.

The fact that 14 and 4 are the basic structural building materials of *Die Kunst der Fuge* is obvious – after all, the work consists of exactly 14 fugues (*contrapuncti*) and 4 canons. Milka persuades that Bach arranged his fugues into two numerical blocks, divided them into two numerically equal parts, each comprising seven *contrapuncti*, and divided each of these parts into two parts as well: the first one – four, the second one – three.

Today, it is commonly believed that Bach considered the number 14 particularly significant from the musical-symbolic point of view – as one referring

¹⁷ H. H. Eggebrecht, *J.S. Bach's "The Art of Fugue"*, p. 28.

¹⁸ A. Milka, "*Искусство фуги*". In 2017, Routledge published an English version of Milka's study entitled *Rethinking J.S. Bach's "The Art of Fugue"*, translated by M. Ritzarev, ed. E. Sheinberg, Routledge, London – New York 2017.

to the surname of his family¹⁹. This number in his music, however, indicates not only the surname, but also... Christ's cross. It is for this reason that Erwin Bodky wrote years ago: "For many years I have thought how much delight and satisfaction Bach must have drawn from the fact that his name inherently carried the symbol of the cross"²⁰. And the surname Bach hides the cross within in the sense that its four letters: B – A – C – H, treated as the names of notes, create a rhetorical-musical figure of an image of the cross – the Latin *imaginatio crucis*. In the music of the Baroque, it was made up by "a four-note melic structure containing the drawing of the cross as an intersection of two imaginary lines, linking the first and fourth note as well as the second and third; [...] based on visual imagery, the *imaginatio crucis* figure was used to interpret texts speaking about Christ's Cross or Crucifixion. When expressions such as 'crucifixus' (crucified), 'crucifigatur' (to be crucified), 'crucifige' (crucify!), 'vidit crucem' (he saw the cross), 'er trug sein Kreuz' (He carried his Cross), 'komm, süßes Kreuz' (come, sweet Cross), and so forth appeared in the texts of passions, motets, cantatas, and the *Credo*, composers introduced that cross figure as a clearly comprehensible emblem"²¹.

The presence of the number 14 in *Die Kunst der Fuge* does not surprise, but what made Bach divide it in this work into two sevens, and each of them into a four and a three, and add the number four (canons) to the whole? Milka argues that Bach was inspired by the Apocalypse here. Speaking in more concrete terms, the structure of the entire *Art of Fugue* could have been suggested to him by Caspar Heunisch's book *Haupt-Schlüssell über hohe Offenbahrung S. Johannis*, one of the numerous theological works he kept in his reference library. The Book of Revelation had a very special place in Bach's works. Suffice it to say, he quoted it more than 160 times in his cantatas, while – for the sake of a comparison – he referred to the Gospel According to Mark 62 times, and to Ecclesiastes – 72 times²². In Heunisch's reflections, and, after him, in Bach, the key place is taken by eight chapters of the Revelation – from chapter four

¹⁹ P. Williams, *Bach: a Musical Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, p. 564.

²⁰ E. Bodky, *Interpretation of Bach's Keyboard Works*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1960, p. 247.

²¹ T. Jasiński, *The Musical Rhetoric of the Polish Baroque*, translated by W. Bońkowski, Peter Lang GmbH, Frankfurt am Main 2015, pp. 132–133.

²² See: A. Milka, *Rethinking J.S. Bach's "The Art of Fugue"*, p. 241. Cf. idem, "Искусство фуги", pp. 316–317.

to chapter eleven, in which St. John, using apocalyptic metaphors/symbols, paints the image of the world at the end of times.

The eight chapters include two famous visions:

7 seals = 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse (riding a white, a red, a black, and a pale horse) + 3 calamities (martyrs, the wrath of the Lamb, silence);

7 trumpets = 4 plagues (hail and fire, “a great mountain burning with fire” thrown into the sea, the star of Wormwood, solar and lunar eclipses) + 3 woes (locusts, plagues of fire, smoke and brimstone, and the judgement of the dead).

And where shall we look for the 4 “canons” in St. John’s? Milka argues that this is about the vision of four animals from chapter four: “[...] and in the midst of the throne [of God], and round about the throne, *were* four beasts full of eyes before and behind. And the first beast *was* like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast *was* like a flying eagle”²³. Since the 4th century, the animals were associated with the four evangelists. In Bach’s times, images of these animals were often placed on tombstones, especially in the Protestant parts of Germany. They also had their musical emblems: four two-voice *canones perpetui* in an enigmatic form, located on the staff drawn in the shape of a circle, in reference to the apocalyptic “circular” content of the words: “and round about the throne”. A characteristic example is the canon *Clama ne cesses* in Adam Gumpelzhaimer’s *Compendium musicae* (1618). In the last period of his work, Bach placed several sets of four two-voice canons in several of his works – not only in *The Art of Fugue*, but also *Clavierübung III*, *The Musical Offering* and *Canonic Variations*.

Milka warns against an excessively literal association of *Die Kunst der Fuge* with the Apocalypse, i.e. an assumption that the subsequent movements of Bach’s work are a musical illustration of the subsequent visions: “In the disclosed identity of the two structures (the central part of Revelation to John and *The Art of Fugue*), their relation and meaning remind the ones belonging to two different words in the Bible with the same gematric indicators: the words are never identical, but mutually explain each other. Similar relations exist between both parts of any paragram, which also have the same indicator and explain each other. In this sense, both these grand works – the Apocalypse and *The Art of Fugue* – can be treated as two parts of a paragram based not so much on

²³ Quoted after: King James Vertion, <https://www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/-king-james-version/read-the-bible-text/bibel/text/lesen/stelle/76/40001/49999/ch/0a9f5-55466f7bca6e384f149acc7254c/> [accessed on 31.08.2019].

two identical numbers (in this case – 14), as on t w o n u m b e r s , which have one and the same structure (14 as 7+7 and, subsequently, 4+3; and the number 4 separately ‘attached’ to it [...]). In this way, also circumstances of the life journeys of authors of these both masterpieces, two grand representatives of humanity, explain each other in their life paragram. Regardless of whose will was represented here – Bach’s or Chance’s (and chance [...] is God’s language) – its elements are one way or another present in both these masterpieces. Towards the end of his life peregrination, St. John was granted revelation on the future of the world. It is possible that Bach in the last years of his life became aware that he was granted a revelation of the subject (*θελο*), to which he fully devoted his life, i.e. *The Art of Fugue*²⁴.

The Russian musicologist perceives a relation between the central part of the *Apocalypse* and *Die Kunst der Fuge*, but does not provide an answer to the question of what it can mean for the interpretation of Bach’s work in more precise terms. He opens up the door to a new interpretation of *The Art of Fugue*, but does not go further himself, suggesting tools to be used in search for an answer²⁵: Baroque musical ciphers, instrumentation originating from the Kabbalah, including paragrams, chronograms, gematria, and further numerical symbolism, musical symbols and metaphors, and rhetoric-musical figures related to biblical motifs, events, and characters (e.g. the musical motif of Christ’s cross).

²⁴ A. Milka, “*Искusstvo фугу*”, p. 325. In the English version of Milka’s study, which differs from the Russian original, we read: “The significance of the detected structural correspondence is more akin to numerological word relations that indicate a hermeneutic comment rather than a lexical identity obviously impossible. In this sense, these two great works can be observed as not only two parts of a paragram, the related parts of which go beyond numerical equivalence (which in this case is 14), but *two numbers that share the same structure* (seven and seven, each made out of four and three) and therefore, by allusion, *echo* similar meanings. In the same way, the life circumstances of two great human beings may comment on each other in their life paragram. At the end of his life journey, St John was granted a revelation about the future of the world. It could just be that Johann Sebastian Bach, in his later years, was granted a revelation of the subject to which he devoted himself, *The Art of Fugue*. Whether by divine coincidence, a Jungian synchronicity of a ‘common psyche’ or a simple human design, the affinity between these two works is a subject about which one might feel compelled to keep thinking. And rethinking” (*Rethinking J.S. Bach’s “The Art of Fugue”*, pp. 245–246).

²⁵ The Russian musicologist does the above in the Appendix, which is not included in the English version: “*Искusstvo фугу*”, pp. 327–400.

3. Theology of abatement

A theological interpretation of *The Musical Offering*²⁶ was offered by the American musicologist *Michael Marissen*²⁷. Just like *The Art of Fugue*, the work was written soon after Bach joined The Society of Musical Sciences, and additionally after and as a result of his famous audience, in 1747, with king Frederick the Great: a politician, philosopher, flute virtuoso, and promoter of the ideas of the Enlightenment. It was then that the ruler played to Bach “an impossible sequences of twenty-two notes on the piano and asked Bach to extemporise. He wanted a six-part fugue from his *thema regium*. The composer excused himself to the king [...]. He played him a theme out of his own head instead, and transformed that into a six-part fugue”²⁸.

The Musical Offering comprises two fugues Bach called, in the old fashioned way, *ricercars*, as well as a sonata for flute, violin and *basso continuo*, and exactly 10 canons. Bach’s masterpiece – Marissen argues – is an encrypted theology written by an orthodox Lutheran concerned by the triumphant march of the Enlightenment. Frederick the Great of Prussia, Voltaire’s friend, “claimed to

²⁶ For a summary presentation of the state of research on *The Musical Offering* in the last few decades, see P. Walker, *Counterpoint, Canons and the Late Works*, pp. 385–391.

²⁷ M. Marissen, *The Theological Character of J.S. Bach’s “Musical Offering”*, in: D. R. Melamed (ed.), *Bach Studies 2*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, pp. 85–106. This text was published in a new version in the author’s book *Bach and God*, pp. 191–225. Maria Oleskiewicz expressed a critical attitude to Marissen’s proposal in *The Trio in Bac’s Musical Offering. A Salute to Frederick’s Tastes and Quantz’s Flutes*, “Bach Perspectives” 1999, No. 4, pp. 79–110. Marissen replied to the above in his *Bach and God*, pp. 201–202, footnote 28.

²⁸ G. MacDonogh, *Frederick the Great. A Life in Deed and Letters*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York 1999, p. 198. Arnold Schönberg, a 20th century master contrapuntist, believed that the Royal Theme was originated by Johann Sebastian’s son: Carl Philipp Emanuel, who from 1740 was a harpsichordist at Frederick the Great’s court. With his help, the king was supposed to prepare a trap for the Leipzig cantor – a theme that from the technical standpoint did not make it possible to perform a six-voice fugue: “Philipp Emanuel had constructed a theme that resisted Johann Sebastian's versatility. [...] The Royal Theme [...] did not admit one single canonic imitation” (*Bach*, [in:] *Style and Idea: Selected Writings*, ed. L. Stein, translated by L. Black, with a new foreword by J. Auner, University of California Press, Berkeley – London 1984, pp. 394–395). Some people argue that the “royal theme” was a fruit of cooperation of Frederick the Great with Johann Joachim Quantz, the ruler’s court musician, or maybe even as a work by Quantz himself, designed to be a challenge for Johann Sebastian’s talent. See J. Sheveloff, *J.S. Bach's Musical Offering. An Eighteenth-Century Conundrum*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewistown 2013, pp. 78–85.

despise all organised religion”²⁹. Let us recall that the deistic Enlightenment favoured the so-called natural religion, rejecting Revelation; it accepted the existence of God, understanding Him as an impersonal power, rejected the redemptive role of Christ, and, all the more, the belief in his deity, considering Him at the most a teacher of morality, and it was very critical towards the Bible and non-rational aspects of Christianity, such as miracles and prayer.

According to Marissen, *The Musical Offering* “was not, as is often argued, a pro-Enlightenment homage of ‘abstract’ chamber music (that is, of art for art’s sake), designed to honor its dedicatee, King Frederick the Great of Prussia, but was a carefully scored defense of anti-Enlightenment Lutheranism, designed primarily, as was all of Bach’s music, to honor God. [...] Far from elevating or shedding radiance and splendor on Frederick, *The Musical Offering* promotes a biblical-Lutheranism understanding of glory, one that Frederick cannot have found sympathetic: the idea of ‘glorification through abasement’, a view tied up with Luther’s ‘theology of the cross’ as opposed to the ‘theology of glory’”³⁰. Bach chose to use for the purpose two *ricercars* – a musical form, which, similarly to the sonata and canon, was considered old-fashioned and obsolete, as well as too strongly associated with the Church, at Frederick’s court, where a new style – called *galant* – was already ruling. At the time, these forms, and in particular the canon, were commonly considered unnatural, artificial, and contradictory to the understanding of freedom in music.

Bach would use *ricercars*, a sonata and canons, as he considered them suitable tools for the expression of religious ideas. The *ricercar* took the pride of place in the sacral music of the Renaissance. In turn, out of the two forms of sonata of their time: *da camera*, the lay one, and *da chiesa*, the church one, Johann Sebastian selected the latter – the one which, significantly, could not be found in the musical library of Frederick the Great. After all, canon already from the linguistic point of view was related to theology, as in church Latin *canon* meant a “rule” and “law”, which brought to mind “God’s law”.

²⁹ Quoted after: G. MacDonogh, *Frederick the Great*, p. 205.

³⁰ M. Marissen, *Bach and God*, pp. 7, 194. For the theology of glory and theology of the cross, see: M. Uglorz, *Teologia krzyża ks. Marcina Lutra [Theology of the Cross of Father Martin Luther]*, “Teologia i Ambona” 1997, No. 16, pp. 45–46.

In Bach's music, canon was often related to the number ten, which symbolised Biblical law collected into one in its synthesis: the Ten Commandments³¹. According to Marissen, Johann Sebastian understood the ten canons in *The Musical Offering* in the spirit of Luther's theology, with its characteristic differentiation between the law (order) and the Gospel. The Father of the Reformation wrote: "[...] the true Gospel has it that we are justified by faith alone, without the deeds of the Law"³². Although the Gospel and the law have one source – God's Revelation – the Gospel stood at the antipodes of law. If, therefore, in *The Musical Offering* Bach really refers – as Marissen argues – to the differentiation between the Gospel and the order, this may mean that he desires to turn Frederick's attention – convert him? – to the most significant things and that he suggests to the ruler the necessity to look for the true faith, true Gospel, to open himself up to God's grace of redemption. Significantly, *The Musical Offering* considerably highlights the idea of "search".

An inscription written in Bach's hand by the enigmatic canon 9: *Quaerendo invenietis* – "By seeking, you shall find" – is about search. It is hard not to assume that we are dealing here with an allusion to Jesus's words from the Gospel: *quaerite, et invenietis*, "seek, and ye shall find" (Mat 7:7; cf. Luk: 11:9). The enigma of canon 9 is therefore not exhausted in the musical riddle, but opens up to the mystery of a search for redemption. Also the two *ricercars* in Bach's masterpiece talk about search, as their Italian name, originating from the verb *ricercare* – "search out" – suggests. The truth about "search" is also hidden in the title preceding the *ricercars*, which Bach developed as an acrostic:

"Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta"

"At the king's demand, the song [that is, the fugue] and the remainder [canonic movements] resolved with canonic art"³³.

The first letters of the subsequent words make the word **RICERCAR**. And what, according to Lutheranism, people should look for, is salvation

³¹ M. Marissen, *Bach and God*, pp. 213–214. See also: A. Dürr, *Kantaty Jana Sebastiana Bacha [Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach]*, translated by A. A. Teske, Polihymnia, Lublin 2004, pp. 429–430; Peter Williams, *Bach: A Musical Biography*, p. 564.

³² M. Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, translated by T. Graebner, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids 1939, p. 29: <https://korycapps.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/luther-galatians-commentary.pdf> [accessed on 31.08.2019].

³³ Ch. Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach...*, p. 429.

through God's grace – to achieve it, however, they need to become aware of their own sinfulness.

Marissen believes that a theological interpretation of *The Musical Offering* is also suggested by Bach's inscriptions added to canon 4 à 2 *per augmentationem, contrario motu* and to canon 5 (a modulating one) solely in the copy of the masterpiece belonging to Frederick the Great, since their message is directed to him rather than any other person:

Notulis crescentibus crescat Fortuna | Ascendenteque modulatione ascendat Gloria Regis³⁴.

Bach developed these two canons as closely linked to each other, because the same word: *Regis* – ends both the dedications Johann Sebastian wrote next to one another. He placed *Regis* below them, in the place in which they meet. A considerable tension, opposition between their affect and external signs of fortune/glory can be perceived in both these works, in their rhetorical-expressive dimension. Marissen writes: canon 4 and canon 5 “show a remarkable opposition between their *Affect* and their external signs of glory. In the first, the dichotomy appears between the usual significance of the majestic French overture rhythms and the unmistakably melancholy tone, and in the second, it appears between the evidently all-encompassing modulations and their deliberate registral finiteness”³⁵. Bach seems to accentuate in both these canons an absence of balance and a difference between the infinite hierarchical majesty due to a ruler, and the humble state of his finite human condition. In a particularly symptomatic way, this tension is manifested in canon 4. Its bass line plays the French overture, with its pomposity and punctuated rhythm, which in the Baroque in normal conditions would be unambiguously associated with royalty – with a monarch's majesty³⁶. However, in the execution of this canon, which Bach demands to be played in augmentation and a reverse movement, the royalty undergoes an erosion, seems to break up. The bass loses its majesty, as its punctuated rhythm can no longer make one think of the sublimity of *ouverture à la française*.

³⁴ Canon 4: “May the fortunes of the King increase like the length of the notes”; canon 5: “And, as the modulation rises, so may the King's glory”.

³⁵ M. Marissen, *Bach and God*, p. 217.

³⁶ See: Sz. Paczkowski, *Styl polski w muzyce Johanna Sebastiana Bacha [Polish Style in Johann Sebastian Bach's Music]*, Polihymnia, Lublin 2011, p. 17.

In the context of the erosion of the majesty of the bass line of *The Musical Offering*, the inscription: “May the fortunes of the King increase like the length of the notes” – which in a normal situation would be understood as “Long live the King!”, takes on a different meaning: the ruler’s fortune is connected with... lowliness – with the theology of the cross rather than splendour and glory. This is because Christ’s cross – according to Luther – is the only place manifesting the true royal majesty and splendour of the Son of God, King of Kings himself, who chose the road of lowliness and service – thus showing people a model life.

4. Musical Christology

A lot supports a hypothesis that also *Goldberg Variations*³⁷ contain a theological message. In more concrete terms, I suggest that the work is a treaty about Jesus Christ, musically presenting the subsequent stages of His life and death: from His Incarnation and Conception, through the entire period of His messianic activity, to suffering, death on the cross, and the Ascension itself³⁸. In this place, I shall rudimentarily indicate only a few arguments supporting such an interpretation³⁹, focusing on just five movements of *Goldberg Variations*, starting with variation 25 – the movement, which together with variation 27, raises questions leading to a Christological interpretation.

Without any doubt, variation 25 is “the emotional high point of the work”⁴⁰, in which the intensity of chromatics turns out to be so great that it “threatens its tonal stability”⁴¹. In turn, variation 27 is the only variation in

³⁷ For a summary presentation of the state of research on *Goldberg Variations* in the last few decades, see P. Walker, *Counterpoint, Canons and the Late Works*, pp. 382–384.

³⁸ A Christological interpretation of *Goldberg Variations* was suggested by the Russian pianist Maria Yudina (d. 1970) in her copy of this work of Bach’s – see Johann Sebastian Bach, *Ария с различными вариациями (Гольдберг-вариации) для клавира. С пометками Марии Юдиной. Вступительная статья и комментарии Марины Дроздовой*, Композитор, Москва 1996.

³⁹ For a more elaborate discussion of the topic, see my study *Kanony śmierci. Słowo o chrystologii “Wariacji goldbergowskich” J.S. Bacha [Canons of Death. A Word on the Christology of “Goldberg Variations” of J.S. Bach]*, Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz/Terytoria, Gdańsk 2019.

⁴⁰ P. Williams, *Bach: Goldberg Variations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 82.

⁴¹ M. Boyd, *Bach*, p. 199.

Bach's entire masterpiece which does not have a bass line, although it belongs to the harmonic foundation of the entire cycle of variations. What can this mean? Why did Johann Sebastian come close to a tonal "disaster" in variation 25, and only in this part? What sense can be derived from the fact that from variation 27 – this particular one and no other – the composer removed the harmonic base? And why does variation 26, which divides (or perhaps, better to say, connects) variations 25 and 27, hide a sarabande (hide is a good word here, as Bach made sure that the rhythms of the dance escape the listeners' attention?). Questions can be multiplied...

Variation 25 is an *arioso*, a deeply touching *adagio*, the unique effect of which is based on a chromatic, descending fourth – it was on such a fourth that songs of mourning called laments or lamentations (*lamento*), expressing suffering, pain, and passion⁴² were based from the 17th century. In Bach's music, an example of such a lament fourth is the *Crucifixus* from *Mass in B minor*. And variation 25 is about the mystery of Christ's cross. This movement is one of the five stylisations of the dance sarabande in *Goldberg Variations*, next to the first movement (*Aria*) and the last one (*Aria da capo*), and variations 13 and 26. The sarabande, a dance originating from Latin America, and perhaps even from Persia, was highly energetic and erotic, even loose⁴³. It was a dance of sensual love, which over time underwent a deep evolution, becoming a calm, dignified court dance in the Baroque period. As such it did not, however, lose its affinity with love sources, although they flowed already in a sublime form lifted to a spiritual level.

Three voices of variation 25 – a soprano and two bass voices – are filled with the figure of *passus duriusculus*, defined as "a chromatically altered ascending or descending melodic line"⁴⁴, expressing sad, painful, mortal states. The lowest voice seemed to proceed in a constant slow rhythm of second progressions – mostly chromatic and fitting in the fourth. The middle voice – full of alien sounds and delays, rhythmically uneasy, significantly intensifies the effect of sadness. Finally, the highest voice was the proper melody of the sarabande

⁴² One of the most famous laments in the history of music before Bach is *Dido's Lament* from Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*.

⁴³ M. Drabecka, *Tańce historyczne [Historical Dances]*, Vol. 1: *Kurant, menuet, sarabanda [The Courante, the Minuet, the Sarabande]*, Centralna Poradnia Amatorskiego Ruchu Artystycznego, Warszawa 1975, p. 115.

⁴⁴ D. Bartel, *Musica Poetica: Musical–Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln – London 1997, p. 357.

– exceptionally flexible, wavy, and ornamental. These “unpleasant passages” surprise with their tonally unexpected melodic turns (e.g. in bar 7 with sixteenth-note triplets), chromatic progressions contained in ambituses of *passus duriusculus* intervals (e.g. from D³ to G^{#2} in bars 10-11), and leaps by very large intervals (especially sevenths and octaves), which, along with passages of seconds constitute the main building motif for the melodics. As if the above was not enough, the highest voice includes the figure of the *imaginatio crucis* (bars 3, 7, 21, 27 or 28).

The dark emotional load can also be found in the diatonic function: in the abundance of dissonances (diminished sevenths, tritones, and seconds) and in the passages and resolutions that are inconsistent with the rules (e.g. bars 10 and 11).

Without any doubt, it is because of all these chromatic, *duriusculus*, lamentational, painful, mortal and cross-evoking features of variation 25 that Wanda Landowska called it a “crown of thorns”⁴⁵, while Ernest Zavorský “deep ‘passion’ music”⁴⁶. This is because with the help of the tongue of the sarabande, a dance of love, and therefore the language of God, who “is Love” (1 John 4:8), it talks about Golgotha.

Variation 26 also contains rhythms of the sarabande, although it is very dynamic and lively. It seems that Bach reaches here for the historical sources of the dance⁴⁷. Sixteenth-notes run down the keyboard like the instantly running time still left for the Crucified to live – a very short time that will irreversibly and ultimately stop at the cross. But the lively contrapunctus is deceptive; it diverts attention from the most important thing, making us practically lose from sight the sensual sarabande *grave*. “The composer added grace-notes or appoggiatura as to some of the chords in his copy, confirming the idea that what we have here is an elegant and *affettuoso* French sarabande – but heard against a runaway, fast-turning motif that migrates and inverts, eventually overtaking the sarabande and brushing it aside in the scramble to the final cadence”⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ Quoted after: E. Bodky, *Interretation of Bach's Keyboard Works*, p. 234.

⁴⁶ E. Zavorský, *J.S. Bach*, translated by M. Erhardt–Gronowska, Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, Kraków 1985, pp. 374–375.

⁴⁷ J. Chomiński, K. Wilkowska–Chomińska, *Formy muzyczne [Musical Forms]*, Vol. II: *Wielkie formy instrumentalne [Great Instrumental Forms]*, Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, Kraków 1987, p. 41.

⁴⁸ P. Williams, *Bach: Goldberg Variations*, p. 85.

One may have a feeling that in the crazy sounds of the highest voice Bach seems to have intended to hide the dance of love. It is as he wanted to say that what is most significant about the passion of Christ on Golgotha (variation 25) and in his last moments on the cross (variation 26) – God’s love – is invisible to the eyes, but is still there. In variation 26, the sarabande cannot be recognised easily – just like God’s love in the passion of Christ. The cross reveals God – according to Luther – *sub contrario*, under opposites. God on the cross is a hidden God, *Deus absconditus*, and in this deepest hiding He reveals Himself most fully (*Deus revelatus*).

Variation 27 is a gigue-like canon. In sequence, this is the ninth and last canon in Bach’s masterpiece, a culmination of *Goldberg Variations*, comprising the total of three movements: variations 25, 26 and 27⁴⁹. Together with this canon, Christ dies on the cross. And death in this movement seems to hide mainly in the eight dissonant leaps by an interval of a seventh – both minor and major – creating the figure of *saltus duriusculus*, a “hardened leap”, which expresses negative states, sadness, despair, regret, but also dying and death, as in the cantata *Christ Lag in Todes Banden* BWV 4 (“Christ lay in death's bonds”)⁵⁰.

In variation 27, Bach is faithful to the details of the evangelical narration, in which we hear the shocking words about Jesus dying abandoned by God: “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mk 15:34). In this movement, Johann Sebastian expressed God’s abandonment of Christ through an abandonment, the elimination, of the bass voice. Let us stress that variation 27 is the only movement of *Goldberg Variations* without a bass line! In the Baroque musical-rhetorical interpretation, the bass, being the lowest voice, i.e. the foundation of music, which could symbolise God – the foundation of the universe and human life – directed our eyes towards transcendence, and indicated the divine⁵¹.

⁴⁹ A. Street, *The Rhetorico-Musical Structure of 'Goldberg' Variations: Bach's "Clavier-Übung" IV and the "Institutio Oratoria" of Quintilian*, “Music Analysis” 1987, No. 1–2, p. 104.

⁵⁰ T. Górný, *Związki retoryki i muzyki – kantata “Christ lag in Todesbanden” Jana Sebastiana Bacha* [Relations between Rhetoric and Music – Johann Sebastian Bach’s Cantata “Christ lag in Todesbanden”], “Ruch Literacki” 2012, No. 6, pp. 739–740.

⁵¹ I. van Elferen, *Mystical Love in the German Baroque: Theology, Poetry, Music*, Lanham – Toronto – Plymouth 2009, pp. 273–318. Cf. Alfred Dürr, *Kantaty Jana Sebastiana Bacha*

Canon 9, i.e. variation 27, has no end – this is because it does not end with a cadence, and it lacks a harmonious-melodic stop. Although the last sound of this movement – both in the right and the left hands – is a G note (G¹ and G respectively), i.e. the note which is the most fundamental one for *Goldberg Variations* that are based on the G major key, the movement ends with a sixteenth-note passage, which does not make us feel the finale. The movement does not end, but is suddenly broken. It seems that it is the virtuoso-figurative variation 28 which is the final for it – with its first bass note, also G, which pulls to it the last sound of canon 9 and immediately shoots up by a decimal interval.

Donald F. Tovey was right when considering variations 28 and 29 as movements picturing triumph, victory. He pointed out that after variation 27 “the great triumphal spectacle begins. [...] we plunge into four pages of purely instrumental writing of the most brilliant character. The look of the printed pages suggests Thalberg or even Liszt, rather than a contrapuntist of the eighteenth century. [...] One variation is not enough to work up to the full triumphant climax, so Bach continues in the twenty-ninth with further developments of instrumental brilliance. This is the only case in the whole work where he has put together two variations of the same type, and in the same tempo and rhythm”⁵². What sort of victory, how big a triumph and what joy – from the theological point of view, from the perspective of Bach’s Christian faith – can be expressed in the movements following the three variations musically describing the Passion of Christ and His death on the cross?

Conclusion

Albert Schweitzer (d. 1965), a Lutheran theologian, organist, and musicologist, wrote at the beginning of the 20th century: “Music is an act of worship with Bach. His artistic activity and his personality are both based on his piety. If he is to be understood from any standpoint at all, it is from this. For him, art was religion, and so had no concern with the world or with worldly success. It was an end in itself. Bach includes religion in the definition of art

[*The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach*], pp. 370, 393–394; E. Chafe, *Tears into Wine: J.S. Bach's Cantata 21 in its Musical and Theological Contexts*, Oxford University Press, New York 2015, pp. 550–551.

⁵²D. F. Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*, Oxford University Press, New York 1956, p. 70.

in general. All great art, even secular, is in itself religious in his eyes; for him the tones do not perish, but ascend to God like praise too deep for utterance”⁵³. Today, we are increasingly aware that Johann Sebastian included/could include a theological message also in the great cyclical and purely instrumental works of the last ten years of his life, when creating “some of the most visionary and profound music ever composed”⁵⁴.

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⁵³ A. Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, translated by E. Newman, Dover Publications, New York 1966, vol. I, p. 167.

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