

*Scientific contribution/Original research/Invited lecture*

# Semiotics and Transcultural Aspects of J. S. Bach's St John Passion

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## Abstract:

This article deals with the music of Bach as both a perfect theological, scientific and art phenomenon. On the example of his work «St John Passion» a hypothesis is put forward about the reflection of the symbolism of the Gospel Word in musical form.

**Keywords:** St John Passion; Chorale preludes; Symbol of eternity; Rhetorical figures; Rainbow music of Bach.

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## 1. Introduction

In modern views on transculture, the human race on its moves “nature - culture - transculture” has been breaking free of customs, conventions, unconscious typical behavior, native culture gravitation. On this road, the dialogue with Johann Sebastian Bach’s music is an asset. He like the keystone of vault as much holds apart as unites pre classical (for example, Baroque) and classical music, stretching out his influence on today’s composers. His music is both a perfect theological, scientific and art phenomenon.

## 2. Religious influences in Bach’s music

Eisenach, the land of Luther and birthplace of J. S. Bach, produced protestant national tradition for further Bach work, especially in ecclesiastical genres. It means he not only refers to protestant chorale resources as the foundation of thematic and melody invention (melopoeia [melə'pē(y)ə]), but builds all his technique of composition and musical way of thinking in accordance with the law of the gospel of Christ and protestant chorale. Therefore, one may understand Bach both through learning of polyphonic music, theology, philosophy.

A special music function in a protestant church is an evangelic (kerygmatic) preaching. In the days of Bach and earlier the ecclesiastical music was to address artistic issues, and even more to search for narratives the Holy Scriptures offered and then to embody them in sounds. The gospel of Christ sang by the congregation in chorales *was immediately followed by* non-verbal interpretation by a church organist. For example, in chorale preludes Bach adds to the tune of a protestant chant other counterpoint lines, which includes melodic idioms, rhetoric figures as they present Christian symbols in accordance with the text of the service prayer, i.e. the text of chorale the congregation has just sung. A Baroque music vocabulary, based on highly developed theory, widely uses affects, melody and rhythm configurations as rhetoric figures. That’s why the Baroque period got the name the Age of Ready Word in science musical literature. Bach’s preludes for organ contain commonly used musical rhetoric figures of “Cross,” “katabasis” (a descent), “anabasis” (an ascent), “circulation” etc - one may see in improvised parts, which set off the melody of wordless chorale relevant to the narrative of a prayer’s verbal content. While a chorale is a sermon in musical sounds, Bach’s preludes for organ become wonderful reflection over sacraments as far as author’s unique artistic fantasy goes.

In bigger genres of his ecclesiastic music, oratorical like Passions, we may see the influence of Dutch contrapuntists, operatic Italian contemporaries, and Baroque instrumentalists. At the same time, Bach expanded the “variations on chorale” principles with a dramatic composition, the polyphonic way of thinking, symbolic musical language.

On one hand, his St Matthew Passion and St John Passion present author’s pieces of arias, ariosos, choruses sung on the Passion Week’s protestant service where we can hear an evangelist’s recitation and congregation’s chants of the Book of Gospels. On the other hand, it is an independent artistic phenomenon, the author’s original piece.

## 3. St. John Passion

Attentive listeners of St John Passion created in 1724 for Good Friday Vespers may notice strange frequent repetitions of some musical text. Its structure and St Matthew’s reminds the arched-shape structure of a cathedral, interconnected by vaults, divided by pillars and interspaces. In St Matthew Passion, arched-shape and replication principles are applied to chorales, in St John Passion replications or tune imitation - to choruses and arias. There are so many of replications that the certain author design obviously, besides pure musical aims, should be understood through theological, symbolic context.

All arias in the first part of St John Passion have key and tonal relationship or reflections within the second part. For example, aria 11 of alto echoes in aria 65 of soprano, soprano aria 13 you may recognize in chorus 34 and 50, tenor aria 19 resounds in alto aria 58 (both, with a motif of mourning, are typical lamento arias). But most repetitions at a short periods between them appear in the second part, the scene of Pontius Pilate's court, the climax for both St Matthew and St John Passions. So: St John Passion: the tone of chorus 36 Kreuzige is similar to 44, and 38 to 42. Therefore, chorus-replicas of vengeful crowd make the outer structural shapes of chorus 40, the most important, sense bearing, chorale, revealing an assignment of Christ Passions.

According to Baroque symbolism this chorale differs because of juxtaposed chorus repetitions that create the shape of chalice – a symbol of Martyrdom - Jesus Christ is going to drink for purpose of redemption of human sins. In the outer structural shapes of chorus 40 one may see another symbol: the Eternity, a religious narrative of that historical period. Vanitas i.e. Eternity, is Bach's favorite symbol in music.

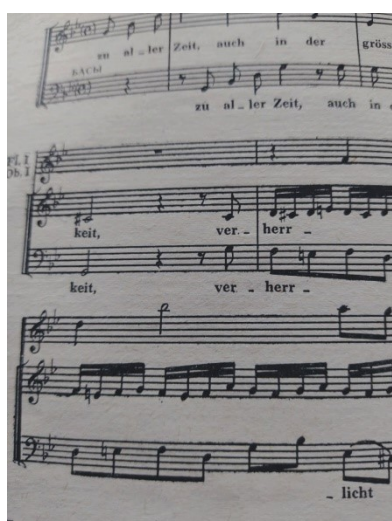


Figure 1: Opening choir. Figures of eternity.

Such numerically organized climax as well as the whole composition of St John Passion means contemplation of *arched-shape* repetitions, because circle is a symbol of Eternity in German protestant musical vocabulary. Eternity is already verbally and musically declared at the opening chorus of the Passion. Voices sing about eternal worshipping of Christ at his mortal torments: orchestra part includes figures of "circulation" as Baroque music specifies a Bible definition of Eternity.

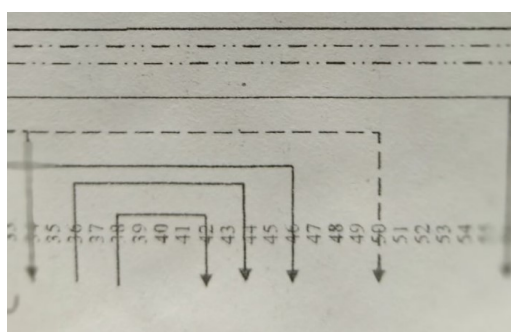


Figure 2: Scheme of repetitions around the chorale № 40.



This rhetoric figure functions not only as was common after the Baroque era, or as a leading motif of a symphony or opera's general melodic pattern and dramatic part, but as a leading symbol St John Passion's structure itself establishes. Moreover, the symbol is of both religious and earthly source. Eternity on the verbal and musical level was first announced already in the opening choir of passions. «The moment words are involved the attention is deflected away from form and towards meaning and interpretation» - wrote in a book about Bach the famous interpreter and researcher of his music J. E. Gardiner [1, p. 19]. But in the Passion according to John, the form influences the interpretation of the meaning, the interpretation of the key words of the text of this work. The religious one enters at the opening chorus, religious chorale texts, but the earthly one in aria 32 – is the symbol of a rainbow in verses by an unclerical author, Christian Weise. The aria says that over torrents of our sins similar to the Old Testament's Flood the Rainbow of the God's Blessing will rise. A. Schweitzer described this aria as "a smile through the tears of the redeemed world"[2]. Same, the Rainbow of the Old Testament, the sign of an agreement between the God and people, foresees the New Testament's Rainbow. The aria's woodwind gliding passages are the symbol of purification, waves of the Flood washing out human sins.

#### 4. Conclusion

An arched-shape musical organization of Passions, especially repetitions, the circumference of chorale 40, builds up an X-shape so called chiasmatic rhythm one can meet in Bible, more often in the Gospel of St John. Once inspired by the most poetic of Testaments, J. S. Bach also assumed its poetic rhythm.

Thus, the principles of arched-shape, thematic, tonal cross-talk through the whole piece of work can be explained that on compositional level he wanted to reveal off-beat symbol which is Rainbow rather than more established in spiritual practice of his time symbols of the Cup of Suffering and Eternity, and in order to do it, he took a poetic text, not the canonic, organized semantic culmination in line with chiasmatic rhythm (ABCBA) pertaining to the Gospel of St John.

Therefore, a coherent analysis and an interpretation of J. S. Bach's work, St John Passion in particular, is not simple and lays in the field of multiple music practices, art, science, theology, i.e. in the field of transculture.

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