Bach's Use of Musical Rhetoric in Lenten Music

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Bach’s Use of Musical Rhetoric in Lenten Music

SOURCE Presentation (May 2020)--Jennifer Perkne
Research Questions

Main Question:
Did the liturgical season have an effect on the compositional techniques J.S. Bach used to compose “O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig” (BWV 618)?

“The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God alone and the refreshment of the soul.”

—Johann Sebastian Bach
Musical Background: “O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig” (BWV 618)

Composer: Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Function: Written for the Orgelbüchlein, a set of 45 chorale preludes for the organ

Genre: Chorale prelude: a short liturgical composition for organ using a chorale tune as its basis.

Other Famous Appearances: soprano ripieno in the opening of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion (“Kommt, ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen”) (BWV 244)
Theological Background

- **Lent**: the period of 40 days which comes before Easter in the Christian calendar. Beginning on Ash Wednesday, Lent is a season of reflection and preparation before the celebrations of Easter (Matthew 4:1-2, Mark 1:13)
- **Passiontide**: the last two weeks of Lent
- **“Lamb of God” (Agnus Dei)**: a title for Jesus Christ that appears in the Gospel of John (1:29, 36). Jesus’s full obedience to God’s will, taking away the sins of the world, is found as both a foundational and integral message to Christianity.
Literature

J. S. Bach Biographical Information
- baroquemusic.org
- J.S Bach: A Life in Music
  --Peter Williams

Genre and Orgelbüchlein
- bach-cantatas.com
- “Musical Rhetoric and Other Symbols of Communication in Bach’s Organ Music”
  --Jacobus Kloppers

Lent, Passiontide, Agnus Dei
- Lutheran Service Book (LSB)
- *Lutheranism 101*
- HarperCollins Study Bible (NRSV)

Fun Fact: “O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig” is LSB 434!!
Methods: Musical Analysis and Theological Inquiry

“O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig” (BWV 618)

Musical Analysis of Rhetorical Figures
- Modal Harmonic Structure
- “Sighing” Motif
- “Cross” Figure

Liturgical Calendar: Lent and Passiontide
- Jesus Christ as the “Lamb of God”
- Lenten penitence
- The Passion of Christ
“O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig” (BWV 618)

Musical Rhetoric and Analysis

- Modal harmonic structure
  - Mixolydian mode
- “Sighing” Motif
- “Cross” Figure
Mixolydian Scale: a major scale with a lowered 7th scale degree

Often described as “saddened” and “blue”

Notice how Bach uses descending E♭’s and ascending E♭’s. This is atypical. Usually, cross relationships between similar pitches were written in the opposite fashion (E♭’s descending and E♭’s ascending). This produces a very “heavy” and “dragging” sound.

This sound paints Christ’s long and weary journey, struggling and being dragged down by the weight of his cross.
Each “slur” (arch) over a set of 2 descending notes is the “sighing motif”. This “sighing motif” is present throughout the entire piece! When performing, emphasis would be placed on the first of these two notes, creating a long-short, or “sighing”, sound.

O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig, suggests a deep despair when performed, with many of the slurred motifs found continually in the piece as, “sobbing”, “sighing”, bearing sins”, or even “dragging the cross”—which is the central focus of the Lenten season. Listeners can visualize Jesus weeping in the garden of Gethsemane as he is about to be handed over to his death.
The “cross figure” has a general motion of **up-down-up-down** or **down-up-down-up** (usually with the middle two notes jumping a substantial interval). Both of the “cross” figures occur at very dramatic cadences within the piece, which indicates that Bach wanted to draw attention to these figures. Surrounding this “cross” figure is a myriad of sharps (♯) and flats (♭) (which, in the musical world, are “opposite” notations). The cross figure in the middle of the opposition of sharps and flats represents the opposition of worlds, the present one of suffering and death and the transcendent one to come.

*On the cross, Christ fully fills the divide between our human, earthy sin and suffering and brings us to a world of perfection and peace in the Kingdom of God.*
Why is this Important?

The season of Lent (and the weeks of Passiontide) are a time of deep prayer, penitence, and sorrow for Christians. In the midst of this sadness, guilt, and even death, there is something strangely beautiful in the death of one person: Jesus Christ. Jesus’ brutal death gives each and every one of us eternal salvation. “O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig” is more than just a chorale prelude to help organists “achieve mastery in the study of the pedal”. My research helps listeners see the beauty in Christ’s obedient death.
Conclusion

The compositional techniques found in “O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig” (BWV 618) paint a picture of Christ, the precious “Lamb of God”, struggling to carry his cross to his inevitable crucifixion. With a modal harmonic structure, listeners can feel the weight of Christ’s cross. Musical motifs convey the weeping of the mourners around Christ, but strongly composed symbols of the cross remind listeners that even though the Lenten season is one of sorrow, there is hope in the resurrection.

“Sendung für Fragen”

What does it mean to give “Glory to God” through music?

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—Johann Sebastian Bach