

Binding Grief: Why Bach's Interpretation of 'Golgotha' Strengthens His Theology

Dear reader, please keep copies of the both German and English lyrics close at hand while reading this essay. I have included both within my writing where applicable, but it may benefit you, as it did me, to be able to read them side-by-side in their entirety.

When listening to recitativo #69, let the poetry sung by the alto guide your ear. Attend to it with diligence. The role the recitativo fills within the narrative of the *Passion* is that of interpreter. A recitativo pauses on particularly important theological ideas, chews them, tastes them, for our intellectual benefit, moving linearly. An aria in contrast explores the emotional response that its preceding recitativo might, or should, bring about within the listener, moving circularly. In short, the former is an exercise in acumen whereas the latter is an exercise in empathy. In recitativo #69 the purpose of the music is not to invoke insight into the condition of the vocalist, but to emphasize the disturbing circumstances and theological contradictions of Jesus's crucifixion. To examine them is not easy, Bach warns. Perhaps none of us are ready to do so. As listeners we follow the guide he devised to assist us: the alto, who bravely voices Bach's thoughts as her own over tense chords which usurp each other in defiance of their usual smooth progressions, and which only resolve at the recitativo's end. There is no "home" key for her to work with, and for us to mentally adopt. By meticulously muddling musical space, by moving beyond the expected progressions already introduced by pieces prior, Bach leaves the idea of "key" void. There is no

solid musical footing for us listeners here, so bind quickly to the poetry of the alto – and in your discomfort seek meditation.

In my hunt for chordal structure i decided to turn to the rhythm of the piece for help. Perhaps to allow the vocalist some freedom of expression, being anchored by a steady pulse, the instruments follow a regular 4/4 time-signature. This time is held most steadily by the bass, which arpeggiates through the eighth notes of every measure, beginning every arpeggiation on one of the ‘big beats’ of the 4/4 time wave, 1 and 3. I could tell it began here because these beats always contained its lowest notes, like pedal points. The rest of the instruments conform to these moments of emphasis and together define chords. Between the big beats i perceived only shifting cycles of, though not the same chord, the same musical feel wrought by adding and subtracting dynamic qualities native to its presiding scale. For example, in measures one through three the presiding scale is Abmaj, and its expressions shift from simple to complex as the alto evokes the grimness of the place which Jesus has been brought to die in:

*Ach, Golgotha, unsel’ges Golgotha!*

*Alas Golgotha, hapless Golgotha!*

Ab is expressed first by a major triad accompanying “alas”, which becomes Ab7 with “Golgotha”, Ab9 with “hapless”, and Ab7 when the name “Golgotha” is evoked again. These tonal additions to the original chord intensity the word each accompanies. But why the word ‘hapless’ is made the most complex and unintelligible to the ear – even more so than “Golgotha”, the subject of the recitativo – that is what i find so curious of this first line of text. The melody of ‘haplessness’ also skips from dynamic quality 7 to 2, abandoning 1 by jump. Is the cause of this

just that ‘haplessness’ is best evoked by great tension, or is there some greater rhetorical reason? Since recitatives inspect theology, as i discussed above, i believe this tension promises more.

When read straight through, the lyrics of *Ach, Golgotha!* flow with dips and swells of syllabic rhythm, though not always subject to poetic meter. This first vocative lamentation of haplessness occurs once more, at the poem’s end. In-between, the vocalist examines the contradictions within Jesus’s crucifixion, the response of the Creator to his death, and the response of her own soul. Though her first call to Golgotha does not rhyme with the phrases following, which do rhyme with each other, her second call *does* rhyme with its preceding phrase. This means that something about the examination gave her call a place within the poem that it did not have before. Can her perception of the ‘haplessness’ of Golgotha not be expressed, or resolved, without first acknowledging the whole pain of the crucifixion, and how it affects her soul?

I think this is why Bach waits to resolve the tension of the recitativo until its ending. But how is the piece able to move, to flow without any resolution? Is there order, or is it just chaos? What method does Bach use to move from idea to idea, from chord to chord, without causing a sense of musical “home” or a resolution for ‘haplessness’ to appear? Listening to the piece, i can barely comprehend what moves happen. All i feel is tension, some brighter, some darker, but always tension. For this to happen, Bach must be subverting our expectations of harmonic resolution in the breath of an instant. This takes minute and subtle precision. A look at the score makes it clearer what is happening. In measure three, the first examination phrase begins,

*Der Herr der Herrlichkeit muss schimpflich hier verderben,*

*The Lord of Glory must in ignominy perish here,*

accompanied by instrumentation in  $A\flat_7$ , which us listeners might expect to resolve to  $D\flat_{\text{maj}}$  as a  $V_7$  to a  $I$ . But instead of doing this, which would convince our ears of a move not just into  $D\flat_{\text{maj}}$ , but into  $D\flat_{\text{maj}}$  as the *subdominant* of a piece *centered* around  $A\flat_{\text{maj}}$ , Bach raises the  $A\flat$  note chromatically by a half-step, turning the  $A\flat_7$  chord into an  $A\sharp^{\circ}$  chord. Though such a change dispels the tension of the dominant seventh and keep the music moving, this is not a “real” resolution in terms of what we have learned, from the preceding chordal changes of the *Passion*, to formally expect. It follows neither the circle of fifths nor usual tritone resolution. As a result, this method of progression is not just ineffective but unnerving. It does not resolve tension so much as *shift* it into a new space. He uses chromatic note alteration for the next move from measure 4 to measure 5 too, furthering the examination with the phrase,

*Der Segen und das Heil der Welt*

*Wird als ein Fluch an's Kreuz gestellt.*

*The blessing and salvation of the world*

*Is, like a curse, put on the Cross.*

In ordinary circumstances the  $A\sharp^{\circ}$  chord would resolve into  $B_{\text{maj}}$  or  $G_{\text{maj}}$ , but Bach instead preserves its new-minted tritone  $A-E\flat$  and chromatically lowers the  $G\flat$  of its other tritone to  $F\sharp$ , thus shuffling  $A\sharp^{\circ}$  into an  $F_7$  chord. This welcomes the new phrase, beginning with “The blessing”, into being. The next chromatic shuffle is from  $F_7$  to  $D\sharp^{\circ}$ , the latter chord colliding with the words “curse” and “cross”, which themselves are sung as a tritone in the melody, then resolving, truly resolving, into  $E\flat_{\text{min}}$ , the sounding of which coincides with “*gestellt*” to “put”, marking the end of that phrase.

This small moment of resolve allows the vocalist to rest before beginning the next phrase. I noticed that these next few lines also rhyme with the ending of the second line, the one sung after the vocalist first evokes Golgotha. But the couplet about Jesus being a blessing, salvation strung on the cross, rhymes with itself. Does this mean that the vocalist took a deeper look into the situation than she planned, that she added to the greater narrative, as if in her reflection she found more to mention about the circumstances of Jesus crucifixion? She certainly took the time to draw attention to its contradiction of natural order, “blessing” being treated as a “curse”, “salvation” being made to perish under the torture of the “cross” – what horror! So, when she continues,

*Der Schöpfer Himmels und der Erden*

*Soll Erd' und Luft entzogen werden;*

*Die Unschuld muss hier schuldig sterben:*

*From the Creator of heaven and earth,*

*Shall earth and sky be taken away.*

*Innocence must die here guilty:*

The vocalist, in her role as a theologian examining the passion, continues to let her knowledge of what will come after Jesus is crucified unfold. The paired clauses about the creator start from Ebmin, and set up the natural order of heaven and earth with a reasonable shift from Ab7 to Db, but as we learn that this order shall be disrupted, another tense chromatic shift happens from Db7 Gb° which then falls into Abmin on the word “innocence”, the parallel minor of where the piece began. I do not sense this parallel as a listener; but I hear the sadness of the minor mode. There is almost a return to Abmaj in measure eleven, but instead of singing Eb after Db and C, the vocalist sings E4; she is not ready to return yet. In order to address Golgotha again, she must

confront what the horror of the crucifixion and its contradictions have done to her soul, having mediated upon them:

*Das gehet meiner Seele nah;*

*It grieves my soul;*

And this – *this* – is the line necessary to end the piece. It is the sweetest and saddest line within the melody, and it is also the most diatonic; it follows the C<sub>7</sub> chord precisely, and as a listener i always feel safe again, having come back to familiar harmony. This makes room for the original vocative lamentation to return, now that it has a preceding line to rhyme with – that is, a home. But not a stable home. The vocalist sings the final “*Golgatha*” by ascending the A<sub>b</sub> maj tritone, but stays, hanging on that precarious seven, unresolved in the open, as the instrumentation comes to rest on not even a whole chord – just the major third.

Why would Bach support the lyrics of this recitativo with such unsettling instrumentation? It seems to be designed to test the limits of the comfort of the ear, to draw attention to the lyrics and the vocalist more than to the accompanying instrumentation. Unsettling music offers nothing to be distracted by – at least, not distracting in way of beauty, like the violin of Aria #47 which held my interest far more than the vocalist. The instruments and vocalist in this recitativo sound rather unsatisfying to me, but their strangeness is also alluring, and that is important. They draw my curiosity. To understand how wrong the crucifixion is, and our utter inability to prevent it, or heal it, i think the vocalist and us listeners must understand that grief is neither pretty nor satisfying. It cannot be made orderly by anything, much less by chords. But it can be reckoned with by reflecting upon the circumstances of its existence, and by approaching it first as movement of the mind one can learn to later approach it within the soul. To feel grief, and to be

fearless in knowing it, is the peace which Bach grants us at the recitativo's end. In order to lament and find resolution, you must know why your grief exists and how it is affecting you. The vocalist cannot address Golgotha until she learns this lesson. As listeners we learn this alongside her; but our own work is not yet done.