Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint

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Vor deinen Thron tret ich and the art of dying

We begin at the end, in July of 1750, with Bach on his deathbed. As was customary in the Lutheran rituals of death and dying, Bach was at home, probably on the second floor of the cantor's apartments in the Thomasschule, in his own bedroom above the Thomasplatz. A week before his death on July 28, Bach's condition had deteriorated quickly when he suffered a stroke which was soon followed by a "raging fever";[1] a pair of failed eye operations performed on him a few months earlier had left Bach blind, and lying in his bed he would not have been able to see the summer morning, early in his east-facing window. The hour of Bach's death was approaching. In these circumstances, the actions of the dying person and of the family members, friends, and clerics standing by were thoroughly ritualized. Those gathered around the deathbed would have comforted the dying man by praying and reading from the Bible, singing chorales, perhaps even playing them on a harpsichord or clavichord. But they were also there to watch for signs: at this critical juncture Bach's every action could give crucial information concerning the destiny of his soul, that is, the outcome of the final contest between good and evil, between heaven and hell. Even Martin Luther himself, when on his deathbed, had been repeatedly awakened by those around him so that they could confirm his faithfulness as near as possible to the actual moment of death. A pastor was the most reliable and resourceful interpreter of the actions of the dying, and during Bach's last week, his father confessor, Christoph Wolle, the archdeacon at the Thomaskirche, was summoned to the cantor's bedroom. Following his training in pastoral care, Wolle would have given Bach a final blessing, quoted

[1] *NBR*, 303; *BD* III, 85.

passages from scriptures, and read prayers, while commenting on the dying man's deportment in order to assure the family that his faith was unswerving. But however comforting father confessor and family may have been, in the last week of his life it was Bach alone who would determine the fate of his soul.

With this ultimate question to be decided over the course of Bach's last days, the composition or, as is more probable, the revision of his so-called deathbed chorale, *Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit*, would have played a crucial role in the domestic drama of his death. Bach's last piece is an elaborate demonstration of intricate contrapuntal technique used to treat a chorale text which both anticipates death and refers beyond it, to the arrival of the dead man in heaven:

> Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit
> o Gott, und dich demütig bitt
> wend dein genädig Angesicht
> von mir, dem armen Sünder nicht.
>
> Before your throne I now appear,
> O God, and humbly bid you,
> turn not your gracious face,
> away from me, poor sinner.

As one might expect of the dying musical utterances of a composer of Bach's stature, *Vor deinen Thron* is embedded in mystery and myth, fragments of truth often indistinguishable from the shapes of legend.

In the source Bach's deathbed chorale, which was copied by an anonymous scribe, is itself a fragment, breaking off after twenty-five measures (see Figure 1.1).[2] The scribe must have copied out the final chorale in its entirety but at some later date the second page was torn off and is now lost. The piece was first published posthumously in 1751, appended to the first edition of the *Art of Fugue* in order to make up, with its intrinsic finality, for the incompleteness of the collection's final contrapunctus. However, the version of the deathbed chorale that appears in the *Art of Fugue* print is provided with the penitential text more commonly associated with the melody *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen sein* (BWV 668a) and, consistent with the layout of the entire collection, is presented in open score rather than the organ format of *Vor deinen Thron*, which is written on two staves. The myth of finality is complicated further by the fact that *Vor deinen Thron* offers a few improvements to the printed version

[2] The chorale comes on the last page of one of the most important autograph collections of Bach's organ works, containing the Trio Sonatas (BWV 525–530), the *Canonic Variations* (BWV 769a) and the "Great Eighteen" Chorales (BWV 651–668). For a summary of scholarship on the source for BWV 668, see Russell Stinson, *J. S. Bach's Great Eighteen Organ Chorales* (Oxford, 2001), 33–38.

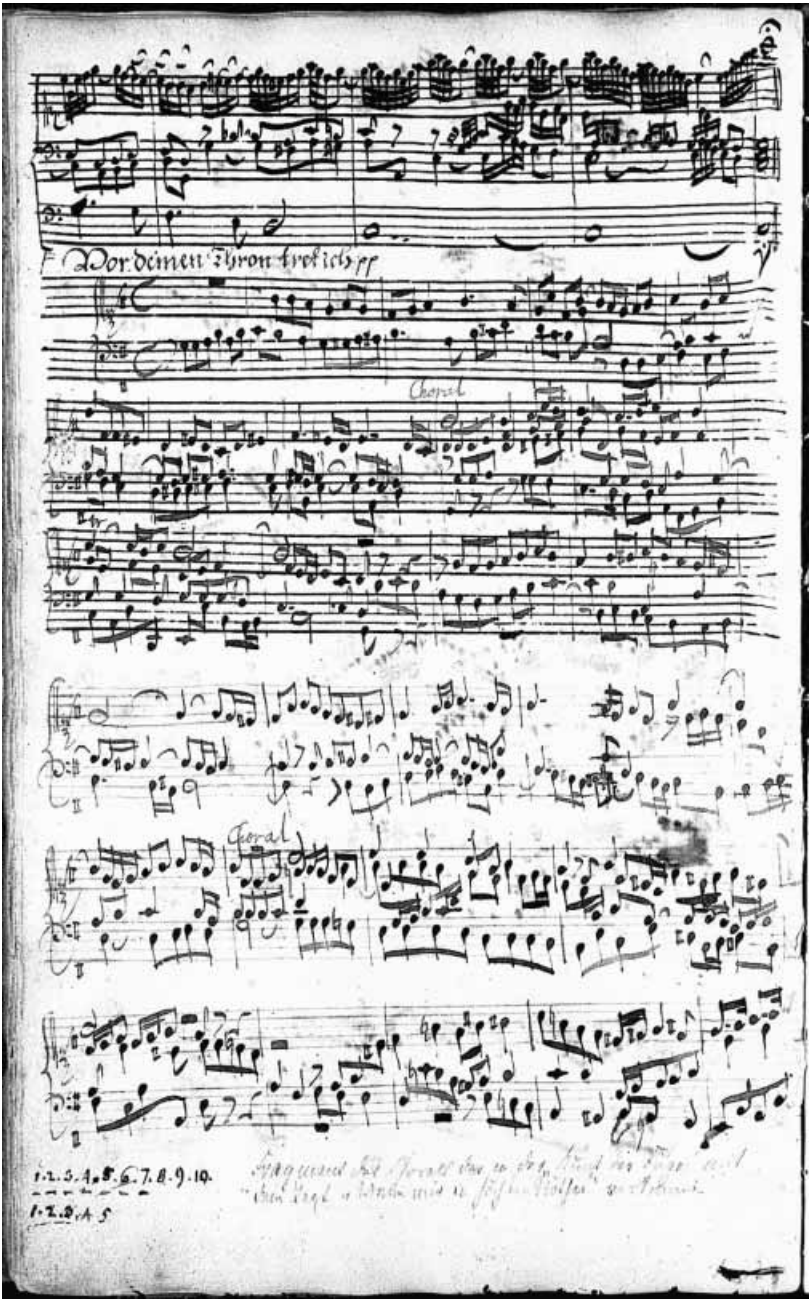
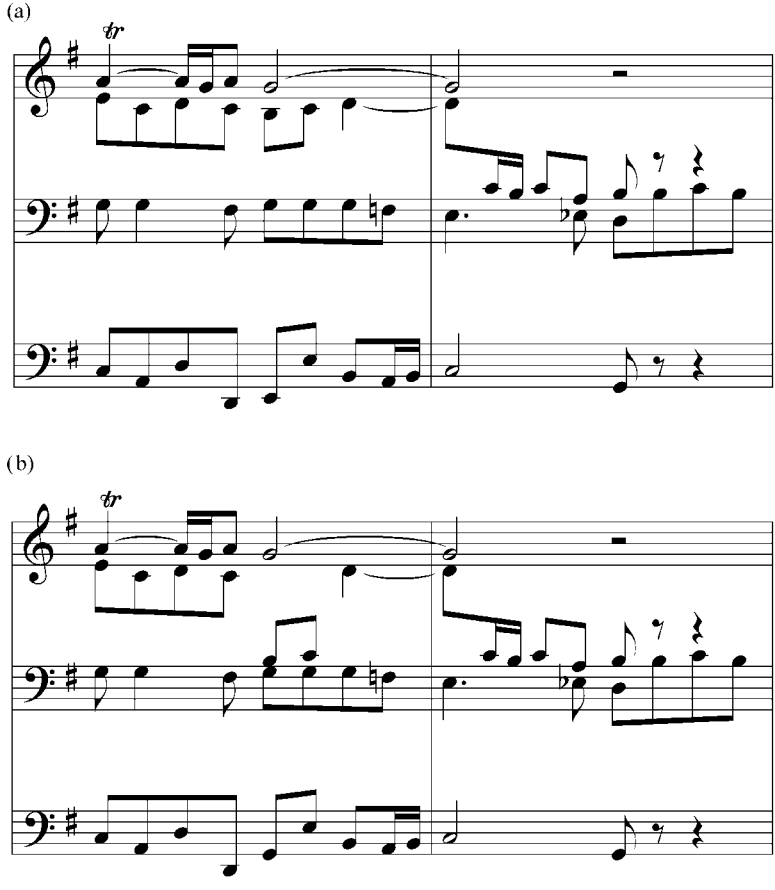


Figure 1.1 *Vor deinen Thron tret ich*, BWV 668, manuscript fragment

Example 1.1 Comparison of two versions of "deathbed" chorale: (a) BWV 668 and (b) BWV 668a, bar 10



appended to the *Art of Fugue*; for example the deceptive cadence found in m. 10 of BWV 668 provides a more satisfying reading than that offered by the authentic cadence at the same place in BWV 668a (Example 1.1). Here is a last word that, in its two versions, suggests a concern for careful revision. Yet in the note (Nachricht) which appeared on the reverse side of the title-page to the first edition of the *Art of Fugue* (1751), Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach claimed that shortly before his death his father had dictated the chorale extemporaneously (aus dem Stegereif) to an unnamed friend.[3]

C. P. E. Bach was not present in Leipzig at the time of his father's death, yet his account of the genesis of the last chorale was accepted

[3] *NBR*, 258, 260; *BD* III, 13.

without question by his contemporaries.[4] In the preface to the second edition of the *Art of Fugue* which appeared in 1752, the Berlin theorist F. W. Marpurg repeated the notion that Bach had extemporaneously dictated his final chorale. J. N. Forkel's 1802 biography of Bach, based in large part on information received from Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, is somewhat more specific, asserting that the composer had dictated the piece to his son-in-law J. C. Altnikol "a few days before his death."[5] Although the early guardians of Bach's legacy presented the deathbed chorale as an inspired, unpremeditated creation, neither version of the piece could in fact have been dictated extemporaneously, at least not in its entirety, as Bach's myth-making heirs hoped to imply. Far from having been conjured up *ex nihilo* by the dying composer, this chorale is in fact an expansion of the short setting of *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen sein* (BWV 641) written around 1715 and transmitted in the *Orgelbüchlein*. The "deathbed" chorale strips the original of its elaborate ornamentation and introduces lengthy contrapuntal interludes thematically based on the chorale melody itself. What is remarkable, however – and this is what must have left a lasting impression on Bach's closest circle – is that even on his deathbed the composer was virtuosically engaged with the techniques of learned counterpoint, including melodic inversion, diminution, and stretto. It was complex counterpoint that had occupied Bach's last musical reflections.

While we should keep in mind that Bach did not compose the entire chorale in the last week of his life – a superhuman act thought by the heirs to be a suitably impressive yet devout summation of his genius – there is no reason to doubt that he was at work on an expanded version of the chorale while awaiting his death, perhaps even before the stroke on July 20. As far as his deathbed labors are concerned, Forkel's scenario seems plausible enough: Bach listened to someone play the piece, then dictated adjustments to an expanded, more contrapuntally complex, yet less elaborately ornamented version of the original *Orgelbüchlein* chorale. Altnikol, or some other family friend or relative, would have served as the amanuensis for these revisions, playing through the piece for the blind composer, who dictated the corrections while lying in what he clearly now knew was his deathbed. Could BWV 668a represent a slightly earlier version of this final chorale, and BWV 668 the last revisions? Given the debilitating illness which beset Bach in his last days, the slight differences between the two chorales might well approximate the level of composerly exertion the ailing man was then capable of.

[4] For an investigation into the myths surrounding the composition of *Vor deinen Thron* see Christoph Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Works* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 282–294.

[5] *NBR*, 466; J. N. Forkel, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig, 1802; reprint Berlin, 1968), 92.

In contrast to the claims of Bach's eighteenth-century devotees, *Vor deinen Thron* was probably singled out for revision by Bach from his backlog of chorale preludes before his last days and carefully chosen as the forum in which to utter his last musical statement. Just as Bach drew on his own library for what was to be the central musical work performed at his funeral, the double-choir motet *Lieber Herr Gott, wecke uns auf* by his kinsman Johann Christoph Bach, he also turned to his personal holdings for a piece that would both prepare him for death and serve as a kind of epitaph, the concluding measures of a musical life. That the final chorale is a set-piece takes nothing away from its legitimacy or significance as a final utterance, for such preparations for death were an integral part of personal religious activity for Lutheran believers of the middle of the eighteenth century, especially for someone of Bach's theological interests.

In his "Sermon on Preparing to Die," a foundational text of the evangelical *ars moriendi*, Martin Luther exhorted his followers to reflect early and often on their dying hour: "We should familiarize ourselves with death during our lifetime, inviting death into our presence when it is still at a distance."[6] Luther's sermon had a lasting influence on funerary homiletics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as on printed collections of funeral sermons such as Johann Heermann's widely-circulated "Schola Mortis: Todes-Schule" (School of Death) which promised to teach readers how "to die blessedly" (selig sterben). Many theologians and writers of popular religious books recommended personal improvement through the reading of and reflection on collections of funeral sermons like those contained in the appendix of Christoph Scheibler's *Aurifodina Theolog* (Frankfurt, 1664), a volume owned by Bach. The study of such sermons and the lives – and even more importantly the deaths – they described constituted a crucial aspect of the Lutheran pursuit of self-improvement and domestic spirituality.[7]

Bach appears to have been a model Lutheran in this respect: he amassed a large theological library, and given the importance of the *ars moriendi* to the Lutheran tradition it is not surprising that the topic of dying figures largely in his collection.[8] After the works of Luther,

[6] Martin Luther, "A Sermon on Preparing to Die," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, 56 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia, 1955–76), XLII, 95–115, at p. 101.

[7] For more on exemplary Lutheran deaths see Rudolf Mohr, *Protestantische Theologie und Frömmigkeit im Angesicht des Todes während des Barockzeitalters hauptsächlich auf Grund hessischer Leichenpredigten* (Marburg, 1964), 229–308.

[8] For an annotated bibliography see Robin Leaver, *Bachs Theologische Bibliothek/Bach's Theological Library* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1985). In all of the works of Müller and Pfeiffer referred to below it is not known which editions of the numerous printings were owned by Bach. My citations are of the editions that I have examined.

which made up the core of Bach's library, the Lübeck theologian and church superintendent August Pfeiffer (eight volumes), and the Rostock Superintendent Heinrich Müller's theological writings (five volumes) are the best represented there. The art of dying is a central theme in Müller's *Geistliche Erquickstunden*, first published in 1664 but reprinted often in the first half of the eighteenth century: "Help me, my God, that I be ever ready, and that everywhere I proceed with one foot in the grave and with the other in heaven."[9] The fundamental premise of earthly existence was that it would lead to death: "Above all things, know that you must die," wrote Müller in *Liebes-Kuß*, another of the books in Bach's collection advising constant preparation for the event.[10] Death was ubiquitous, neither isolated in hospitals nor unusual in the young and seemingly healthy. This much Bach's own life would have taught him painfully: orphaned at age ten, he went on to outlive twelve of his twenty children. The unexpected and arbitrary nature of death was brutally demonstrated to him in 1720 when he returned home to Cöthen after an extended trip to find that his wife, Maria Barbara, was dead and buried. She had been in fine health when he left.

Even for the devout, however, belief alone would not make the dying hours easy: although it was the door through which one entered eternity, death was plainly to be feared. The literature on dying typically includes admissions by authors, self-evidently pious, that they too fear death. In *Anti-melancholicus*, a book that belonged to Bach and one which contains a lengthy chapter on the final struggle with death (Todes Kampff), August Pfeiffer unleashed his most grimly descriptive language: "I take fright as well whenever I think that my limbs, which I so carefully nourished and clothed and so tenderly cared for in my lifetime and which did me such steadfast service, should moulder and rot in the earth, and become a stinking carcass, dung, and filth, and perhaps be carried off by a thousand worms or maggots."[11] For, as Bach would have learned on reading Pfeiffer, Müller and others, the hour of death (*Todes-Stunde*) brought with it an intensification of the devil's efforts, since there was little time left to win the damnation of the dying person's soul. The literature on death in Bach's library relished these opportunities to present harrowing pictures of this last pitched battle,

[9] Heinrich Müller, *Geistliche Erquickstunden* (Frankfurt, 1700), 600.

[10] Heinrich Müller, *Vermehrter und durchgehends verbesserter Himmlischer Liebes-Kuß oder Göttliche Liebes-Flamme* (Nuremberg, 1732), 677, 679.

[11] August Pfeiffer, *Anti-melancholicus, oder Melancholey-Vertreiber* (Leipzig, 1691). I include the German to give a better sense of its vehemence: "Ich erschrecke auch / wenn ich daran dencke wie diese mein Glieder die ich bey Lebzeit so sorgfältig ernehrt und bedecket die ich so zärtlich gehalten / die mir so viel treue Dienste gethan sollen in der Erden verwesen / verfaulen zum stinckenden Todten-Aas / Koth und Unflath und vielleicht von 1000. Würmern oder Maden verschleppt werden." Pfeiffer, *Anti-melancholicus*, 583.

particularly through negative example, that is, when the dying person had been godless during his or her life, or had lost the faith at the end: snapping lions, armies of demons, gnawing worms form the backdrop for this theatre of damnation. While such imagery was far from comforting, it was intended to channel the readers' energies towards preparedness, for only through unswerving efforts could the battle be won. Once equipped with the proper training to withstand any assault, the righteous were encouraged to treat death as a blessing: the saved were compared to babes in their mothers' arms, and the jubilation of angels dispersed the torment of demons (Figure 1.2).[12] On the one hand, unwavering preparations were necessary since the time of any individual death was kept hidden by God, and to be caught unawares could have catastrophic consequences. But these preparations were equally valuable in the event of a long drawn-out death such as that experienced by Bach. In the case of an extended battle, Pfeiffer offers the reader a potent mixture of fear and consolation to encourage him not to succumb to despair in the final days and hours, and in his chapter on the "Hour of Death" (Todes-Stunde) found in *Anti-melancholicus* he combines theological argument, linguistic analysis and metaphysical explanation with practical recommendations for prayer and methods of preparation that would allow one to remain faithful until the moment of death.[13]

Often fixating on the *Todes-Stunde* and the course of the final battle, funeral sermons frequently detailed the medical conditions that had led to the death of the person being eulogized.[14] Typical were the funerary homiletics of two leading figures of the Leipzig Orthodox tradition of the seventeenth century, Martin Geier and and his nephew Johann Benedict Carpzov, both of whom often included medical case histories of the deceased in their sermons – partly, it seems, to drive home the point that even the costly intervention of physicians could not prevent death when God so willed it. Such accounts also disabused believers of the enticing but errant notion that medical science could render death physically easy: even if one could afford the best physicians and medications, the final test would be dire and unrelenting. After recounting the physical demise that led up to death, funeral sermons invariably reported on the behavior of the person once he or she realized that death was unavoidable: after detailing the inevitable loss of the physical battle against the final illness, the preacher turned to the spiritual triumph of the deceased. In this respect Bach's own obituary, written by his son and two of his students, parallels contemporary funeral sermons in its recounting of the causes of death, the futile attempts of medical

[12] Müller, *Liebes-Kuß*, 672, 676. [13] Pfeiffer, *Anti-melancholicus*, 608–609.
[14] Eberhard Winkler, *Die Leichenpredigt im deutschen Luthertum bis Spener* (Munich, 1967), 9.

Figure 1.2 The battle with death, August Pfeiffer, *Liebes-Kuß* (1732)

professions to help the dying man (Bach dies "despite every possible care given him by two of the most skillful physicians") and the final peaceful departure for the next life, even noting the exact time of his death, "on July 28, 1750, a little after a quarter past eight in the evening, in the sixty-sixth year of his life."[15]

[15] *NBR*, 303.

The formulas of redemption offered by sermons and also to be found in the contemporary literature of moral uplift were intended to provide concrete examples of pious deaths, models for others preparing for their own dying battles. Bach was certainly familiar with the content of Martin Geier's famous sermon preached at the 1672 Dresden funeral of Heinrich Schütz, since it had been glossed and quoted from in the introduction to the official Leipzig hymnal of 1730; the complete text of the sermon also circulated in a reprint edition published in Leipzig in 1687.[16] Schütz had suffered a final stroke that deprived him of the ability to speak; doctors were called in but yet again could provide no help; at last the father confessor was summoned and he read relevant scriptural passages. Geier makes sure to highlight the firmness of the dying man's belief even while beset by his final illness:

> Several times the patient, with a nod of the head or a motion of the hands, indicated that he retained Jesus in his heart, whereupon the father confessor bestowed on him the last blessing. He lay asleep until finally the breath and pulse gradually declined and then ceased. The clock had struck four when he gently and blessedly departed this life without tremor, with the prayers and singing of those standing about.[17]

Thus the death of the leading Lutheran musician of the seventeenth century served as a model for successors such as Bach. Indeed, it would have been through the study of such examples that Bach prepared for his own death, and the scene portrayed by Geier – the confessor, the hymns, the search for signs of piety just prior to death – was likely quite similar to the final hours of Bach's life.

The study of texts – the Bible and chorales – played a central role in preparation for death. In *Liebes-Kuß*, Müller urged the believer "to choose several beautiful, comforting passages (*Trost-Sprüchlein*) with which to go to sleep,"[18] texts which were to be drawn from the basic lexicon of Lutheran thought, the Bible and the chorales. This is not simply recommendation for nightly prayer; Müller is also using "sleep" figuratively to refer to death, a common metaphor in Lutheran thought, and one we will return to later. According to Müller, the internalization of these passages is meant to provide a bulwark against temptation so that even the anguish of death will not distract the dying person from adhering to the content of these memorized words.

Indeed, last words were crucial not only to the dying, but to their survivors as well. For the former, the reiteration of individually chosen

[16] Robin Leaver, "The Funeral Sermon for Heinrich Schütz I: Introduction," *BACH* 4/4 (October, 1973): 3–17.

[17] Robin Leaver, "The Funeral Sermon for Heinrich Schütz, Part II, the Biographical Section," in *BACH* 5/1 (July, 1974): 13–20, at p. 19.

[18] Müller, *Liebes-Kuß*, 691–692.

passages anchored belief, while for the latter these final utterances provided proof that the deceased had triumphed over death by remaining true to God's word until the last; such a steadfast statement of belief consoled the mourners with evidence that the soul of the dead person was in heaven. Having the character of rehearsed epitaphs, these dying words were frequently included in funeral sermons. In *Gräber der Heiligen* Müller reported that the evidence that a certain man had been saved "was demonstrated by his last words" (zeiget an sein letztes Wort) which were drawn from a well-known chorale: "I will not leave my Jesus" (*Meinem Jesum laß ich nicht*).[19]

The usefulness of chorales in preparing for the final struggle is encapsulated in the work of the chorale commentator Gabriel Wimmer, a Lutheran cleric who published an exegesis of "Dearest Lord, when shall I die?" (*Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben*?) in Leipzig in 1730. Bach had set the text and melody in his Cantata 8 for the sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, a moment in the liturgical year which elicited some of his most extended musical reflections on death.[20] Following the traditional formulations found in the Lutheran literature on death and dying, Wimmer's commentary praises the chorale as a beautiful and eminently practical way of contemplating death, and he sets out a far-reaching *ars moriendi* with a line-by-line theological interpretation of the chorale text. For Wimmer, a tireless interpreter of the rich body of chorale texts,[21] the cultivation of the art of dying could ensure redemption. Practice, which was to include the study of chorales, is decisive, and Wimmer describes "a daily dying Christian" (ein täglich sterbender Christ) – that is, one who takes seriously the *ars moriendi* – as "a good theologian" (ein guter Theologus). With their marriage of text and music, chorales allowed statements of belief to be deeply inscribed on the soul, just as Müller had envisioned when he recommended assembling a catalog of passages with which to face death.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century reflections on "last words" had developed into an identifiable genre of personal study and uplift. The Hersfeld theologian Conrad Mel originated the idea of delivering and then printing an entire year's worth of sermons devoted to the dying utterances of biblical figures, and he observed that the dying often gained the power "to deliver the quintessence of their best thoughts."[22]

[19] Quoted in Winkler, *Die Leichenpredigt*, 171. For another example of chorale singing at the deathbed, see Mohr, *Protestantische Theologie*, 288.

[20] Gottfried Wimmer, *Caspar Neumanns . . . Sterben-Lied* (Leipzig, 1730), 9; quoted in Martin-Christian Mautner, *Mach einmal mein Ende gut: Zur Sterbekunst in den Kantaten Johann Sebastian Bachs zum 16. Sonntag nach Trinitatis* (Frankfurt, 1997), 287.

[21] Gabriel Wimmer, *Ausführliche Liederklärung* (*wodurch die ältesten und gewöhnlichsten Gesänge der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche . . . erläutert worden*) (Altenburg, 1749).

[22] Conrad Mel, *Die letzte Reden der Sterbenden*, 3rd edn., preface, quoted in Winfried Zeller, *Theologie und Frömmigkeit*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, 2 vols. (Marburg, 1971–78), II, 31.

Similarly, Pfeiffer noted in *Anti-melancholicus* that "in the final hour of death, when all physical powers have fallen away, one often hears with astonishment how such people . . . speak completely rationally of high and heavenly matters."[23] Last words and actions were not simply a matter of piety, however; rather, they allowed those surrounding the deathbed a passing glimpse of transcendence, of heavenly life as seen through the eyes of the dying. If Bach adhered to the teachings on dying so amply collected in his library, he would necessarily have prepared some kind of final statement, knowing that a chorale could provide a focus for the forthright contemplation of, and preparation for, death. The final corrections to the preexisting, and perhaps already revised, chorale that resulted in *Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit* were thus a last devout utterance in the lofty musical discourse that would be worthy of a saved man – the quintessence of Bach's best thoughts. Manipulating complex counterpoint provided a way for Bach to guide his reflections, to resist the devil's temptation; the result confirmed for the family that having died a pious death, Bach's soul was destined for heaven.

It was not uncommon for Lutheran composers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to respond in music to the admonitions of contemporary preachers that they prepare themselves for death. In 1683, following an outbreak of the plague in Erfurt which claimed his wife and child, Johann Pachelbel published his *Musicalische Sterbens-Gedancken*, a collection of four extended variation sets on well-known chorale tunes associated with death and dying.[24] A decade later, the organist Christian Flor published a work of learned counterpoint with the striking title *Todesgedanken in dem Liede: "Auf meinen lieben Gott," mit umgekehrtem Contrapuncte fürs Clavier sehr künstlich gesetzt und gedruckt zu Hamburg 1692* (Thoughts on death in the song "On My Beloved God," in invertible counterpoint very artfully set for the clavier and printed in Hamburg 1692).[25] The teenage Bach was a chorister in Lüneburg where he came into contact with Christian Flor's son Johann Georg, and it is perhaps through him that Bach gained his knowledge of some of the elder Flor's music. Whether or not Bach actually saw the elder Flor's *Todesgedanken*, he could have read a reference to this work in Walther's *Lexicon*. The titles used by Pachelbel and Flor refer to the category of personal study and death preparation found so frequently in contemporary books on the *ars moriendi* such as those by Müller,

[23] Pfeiffer, *Anti-melancholicus*, 589.

[24] Johann Gottfried Walther, *Musicalisches Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1732; reprint, Kassel, 1953), 458.

[25] Ibid., 249. This piece is also cited by Walther. The striking association of death with contrapuntal music was first noticed by Friedrich Riedel; see his *Quellenkundliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der Musik für Tasteninstrumente in der zweiten Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1990), 70, 182.

Pfeiffer and Wimmer, which continually press the reader to entertain *Sterbens-Gedanken*, *Todes-Gedanken*, and *Todes-Andachten*.[26]

But it is the highly self-conscious use of strict counterpoint, elaborately described in the title itself, which distinguishes Flor's volume from that of Pachelbel, and, in turn, links it with a north German practice of commemorating death through elaborate contrapuntal techniques – a practice that extended through to Bach's dying hours. An outstanding example of this tradition is presented by Dieterich Buxtehude's *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin* (BuxWV 76), a setting in invertible counterpoint of Luther's burial hymn which was performed at the funeral of Buxtehude's father, Johannes, in 1674. This was not the first time Buxtehude had written strictly contrapuntal funeral music; three years earlier, he had composed and published a learned work for the funeral of the former Lübeck superintendent, Meno Hanneken the elder.[27] Only the music for Johannes Buxtehude's burial survives, and the piece shows just how exacting his son made his counterpoint for this deeply meaningful funerary context. Buxtehude's 1674 setting of *Mit Fried und Freud* is made up of four movements grouped into two pairs, each made up of a *contrapunctus* and its harmonic inversion, called an *evolutio*. The first pair inverts the arrangement of the voices, the second pair introduces melodic as well as harmonic inversion (see Example 1.2).[28]

In 1704 Bach's relation and Weimar colleague Johann Gottfried Walther had traveled to Halberstadt to visit the noted theorist and organist Andreas Werckmeister; the two carried on a regular correspondence, and Walther received from Werckmeister a large number of keyboard works by Buxtehude and others; included among these must have been Buxtehude's *Mit Fried und Freud*, because Walther discussed particulars of the piece's use of inversion in his composition treatise, *Praecepta der musicalischen Composition* – a work completed in 1708, the year of Bach's arrival in Weimar.[29] Bach would likely have seen the *Praecepta* as well as Buxtehude's counterpoints on *Mit Fried und Freud*. For his part,

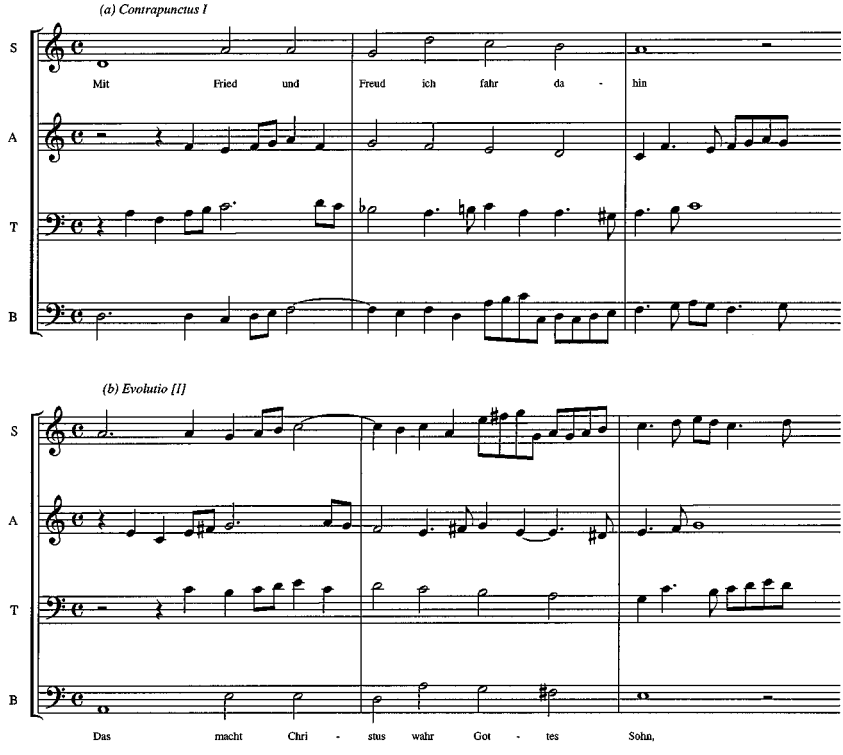
[26] See, for example, Müller, *Liebes-Kuß*, 680–681; and Pfeiffer, *Anti-melancholicus*, 595. See also the anonymous *Evangelische-Todesgedancken* (Gotha, 1675).

[27] That Buxtehude reused Hanneken's 1671 funeral music for his own father's burial is assumed by Kerala J. Snyder in *Dieterich Buxtehude: Organist in Lübeck* (New York, 1987), 214; this conclusion is based on the fact that the surviving title-pages of both works describe their respective contents as both consisting of "two counterpoints." The claim for the identity of the two works is contested by Dietrich Kilian in *Das Vokalwerk Dietrich Buxtehudes* (Berlin, 1956), 79, and Norbert Bolin, *"Sterben ist mein Gewinn": Ein Beitrag zur Evangelischen Funeral-Komposition des Barock* (Kassel, 1989), 261.

[28] For a more detailed analysis of BuxWV 76 see David Yearsley, "Towards an Allegorical Interpretation of Buxtehude's Funerary Counterpoints," *Music & Letters* 80/2 (May 1999): 183–206.

[29] Walther, *Praecepta der musicalischen Composition*, ed. Peter Benary (Leipzig, 1955). Walther claimed to own more than 200 pieces by Buxtehude and Bach; those by Buxtehude, many of which he claimed were autographs, had been passed on to him by the aged Werckmeister. He mentions his acquisition of Werckmeister's collection

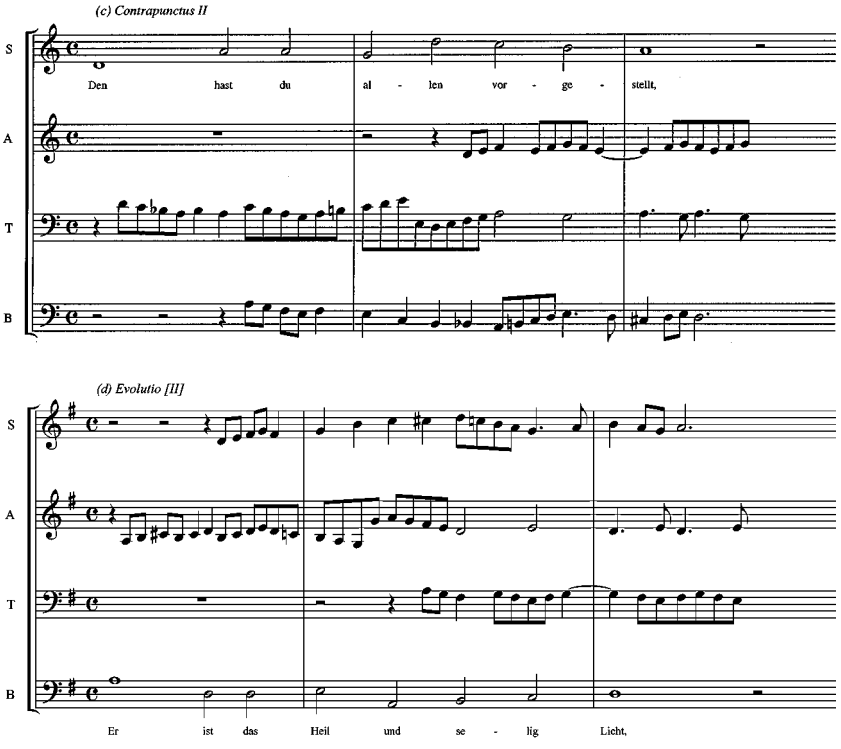
Example 1.2 Dieterich Buxtehude, *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin*, BuxWV 76/1: *Contrapunctus I–Evolutio I; Contrapunctus II–Evolutio II*, mm. 1–3 in each



Walther had tried to emulate Buxtehude's contrapuntal procedures in the second and third verses of his setting of the chorale melody *Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott* which features two counterpoints and their harmonic inversions, employing the same inversion scheme as that of Buxtehude's *Mit Fried und Freud*. (The first *evolutio* of the second verse is simply a slightly decorated version of the second *evolutio* [Example 1.3].) Given that Bach and Walther shared many of their ideas and interests during their years together in Weimar, it is hard to imagine that Bach would not have been aware of Buxtehude's celebrated funerary piece; moreover, Bach himself had visited Lübeck to study with Buxtehude for four months in 1705–06. His musical activities there included attendance at – or, more likely, participation in – the *Castrum doloris*, the enormous semi-theatrical spectacle presented in the Marienkirche in Lübeck to

of Buxtehude manuscripts in two letters to Heinrich Bokemeyer: August 6, 1729 and October 3, 1729. See J. G. Walther, *Briefe*, ed. Klaus Beckmann and Hans-Joachim Schulze (Leipzig, 1987), 62–83, esp. 70. See also Snyder, *Dieterich Buxtehude*, 126–128.

Example 1.2 (*cont.*)



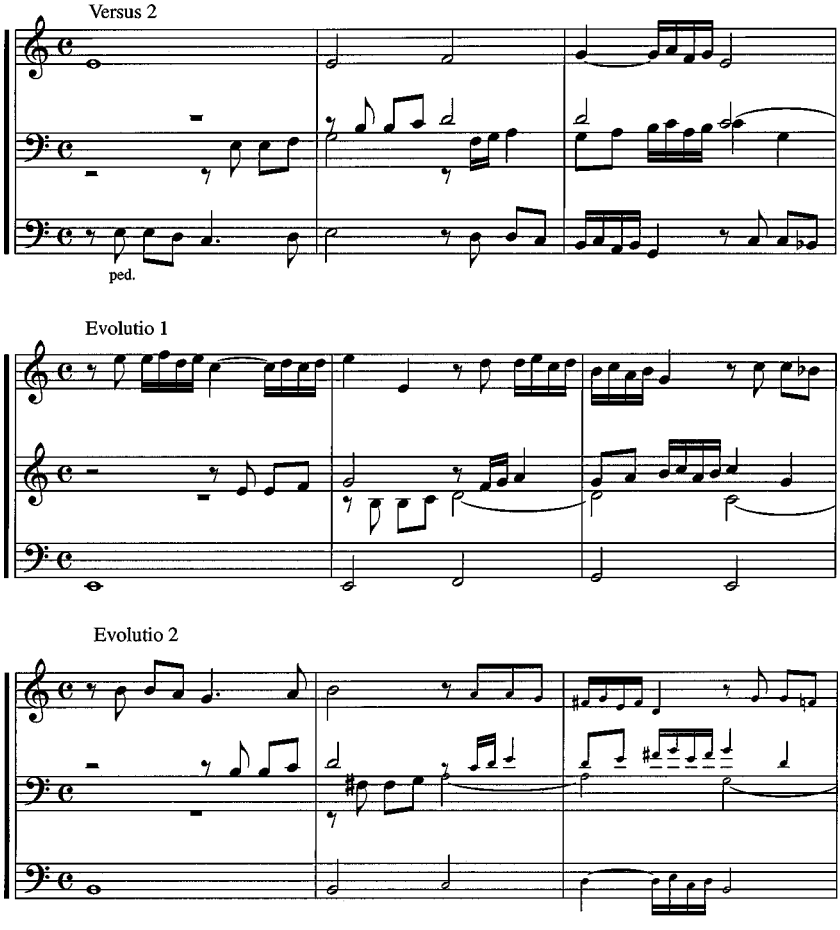
mark the death of Emperor Leopold I.[30] Through this direct contact and his later study of Buxtehude's funerary works, Bach would have familiarized himself with the full range of musical approaches to death, from the monumental *Castrum doloris* to the contained and controlled *Mit Fried und Freud*.

Just as Walther had constructed a piece of learned counterpoint using Buxtehude's *Mit Fried und Freud* as a model, Buxtehude had based his own effort directly on *Prudentia prudentiana* by Christoph Bernhard, onetime director of music in Hamburg (a city well within Buxtehude's musical orbit). Also descended from *Prudentia prudentiana* or perhaps, more directly, from Buxtehude's *Mit Fried und Freud* is a work by the Copenhagen organist Martin Radek entitled *Jesus Christus unser Heylandt, in ordinari und doppelten Contrapunt gesetzt* (Jesus Christ our Savior, set in ordinary and double counterpoint), which survives in a copy by Walther.[31] For his contribution to the art of writing in

[30] Only the libretto of this massive production survives.

[31] This work is found in Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Mus. ms. 6473M. See Harald Kümmerling, *Katalog der Sammlung Bokemeyer* (Kassel, 1970), 11–12. For a modern

Example 1.3 J. G. Walther, *Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott: Versus 2–Evolutio 1/Evolutio 2; Versus 3–Evolutio*; mm. 1–3 in each

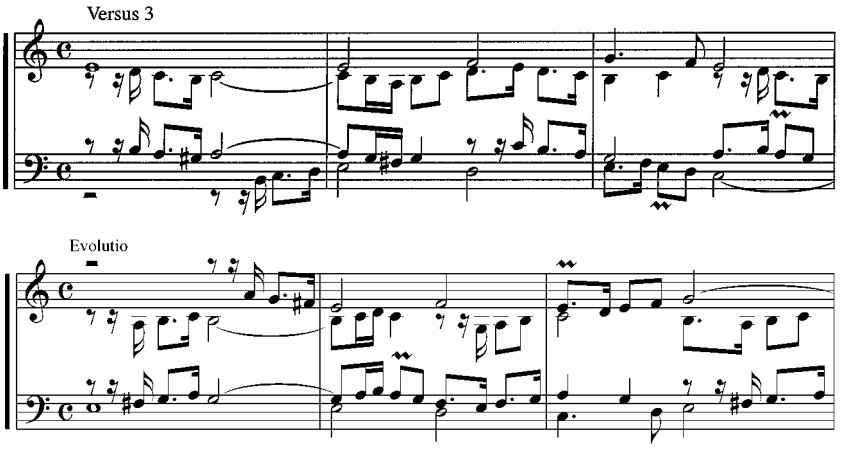


double counterpoint, Radek treated the well-known communion chorale, which was also sung on Maundy Thursday and was associated with the passion and death of Christ.

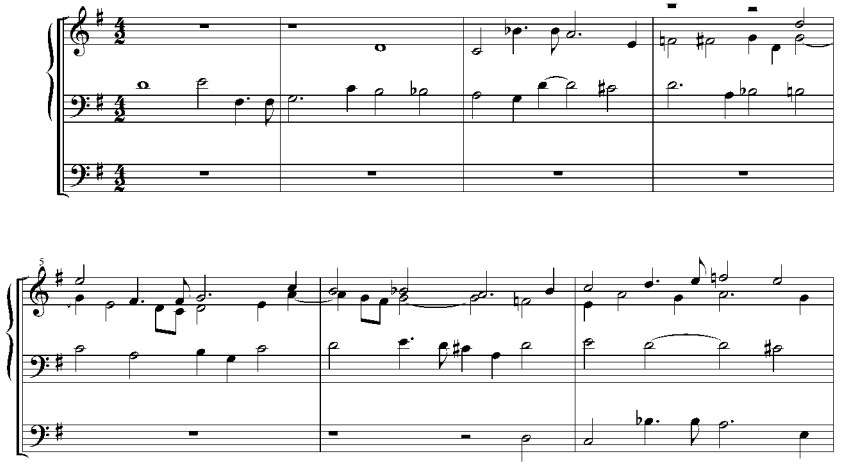
In 1685 Nicolaus Adam Strungk, whose peripatetic career took him as far north as Hamburg and as far south as Rome, composed his extraordinary *Ricercar Sopra la Morte della mia carissima Madre Catharina Maria Stubenrauen*. Strungk reflects on the death of his mother in a long and complex contrapuntal essay, one which begins as a *fuga contraria riversa*

edition of the work see Martin Radek, *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland: Koralvariationen*, ed. Bo Lundgren (Copenhagen, 1957).

Example 1.3 (*cont.*)



Example 1.4 N. A. Strungk, *Ricercar sopra la Morte della mia carissima Madre*, mm. 1–7



where the fugal subject is answered by its exact melodic inversion, and culminates in a section combining the opening theme with three countersubjects (Example 1.4). Walther singled out the piece among Strungk's keyboard works; C. P. E. Bach listed Strungk as one of his father's influences, and it would seem unlikely that this, perhaps Strungk's most famous keyboard piece, would have remained unknown to Bach. Though more flamboyant than Bach's *Vor deinen Thron* in its use of counterpoint, Strungk's *Ricercar* would have offered Bach the chance to play

and to study one of the most powerful reflections on death composed in the seventeenth century.[32]

The practice of using counterpoint as a means of contemplating death, as represented in this group of interrelated pieces, may have grown out of a still earlier tradition. A century before Bach's birth, the south German editor and composer Adam Gumpelshaimer published his *Compendium musicae latino-germanicum*, a mainstay of the Latin school system in Lutheran Germany that included numerous pedagogical canons intended to help train students to sing polyphony. The volume was reprinted more than a dozen times in the seventeenth century and was likely encountered by Bach in the musical education he received in his native Thuringia or in the northern city of Lüneburg. The frontispiece to Gumpelshaimer's collection is an engraving of the cross made up of a six-part retrograde canon, an allegorical image which links the crucifixion with learned counterpoint – the most universal of deaths here bound to the most elaborate of compositional techniques (Figure 1.3).[33] Canon, of course, was by no means specific to death-commemorative genres; but given his interest in the work of the late seventeenth-century composers who drew on associations between death and learned counterpoint, it is little wonder that Bach explored these same connections in *Vor deinen Thron* during the long hours of his dying.

What was it that gave the associations between death and counterpoint their resonance? For an answer to this question, we must turn to the music theory of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. One of the most prolific and influential theorists of the period was the central German organist Andreas Werckmeister, whose 1702 composition treatise *Harmonologia musica* included two laudatory poems by Buxtehude.[34] By 1702, the year the *Harmonologia* appeared, Werckmeister had probably already acquired his large collection of Buxtehude's music, including the funerary settings of *Mit Fried und Freud*. Buxtehude's contrapuntal essay may even have been in Werckmeister's thoughts when he wrote in the *Harmonologia musica* of the "curious (*wunderlich*)

[32] For a discussion of the musical sources – including music by Strungk – that Bach studied and made manuscript copies of as a youth see Robert Hill, " 'Der Himmel weiß, wo diese Sachen hingekommen sind': Reconstructing the Lost Keyboard Notebooks of the Young Bach and Handel," in *Bach, Handel, Scarlatti: Tercentenary Essays*, ed. Peter Williams (Cambridge, 1985), 161–172.

[33] Adam Gumpelzhaimer, *Compendium musicae latino-germanicum*, 9th edn. (Augsburg, 1632). This canon is taken from Pietro Cerone's *El melopeo* (Naples, 1613), 1130–1131. See Denis Brian Collins, "Canon in Music Theory from c. 1550 to c. 1800" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1992), 324–328. For a solution to the canon see Wil Dekker, "Ein Karfreitagsrätselkanon aus Adam Gumpelzhaimers *Compendium musicae* (1532)," *Die Musikforschung* 27/3 (1974): 323–332.

[34] For these poems, along with English translations, see Snyder, *Dieterich Buxtehude*, 127.

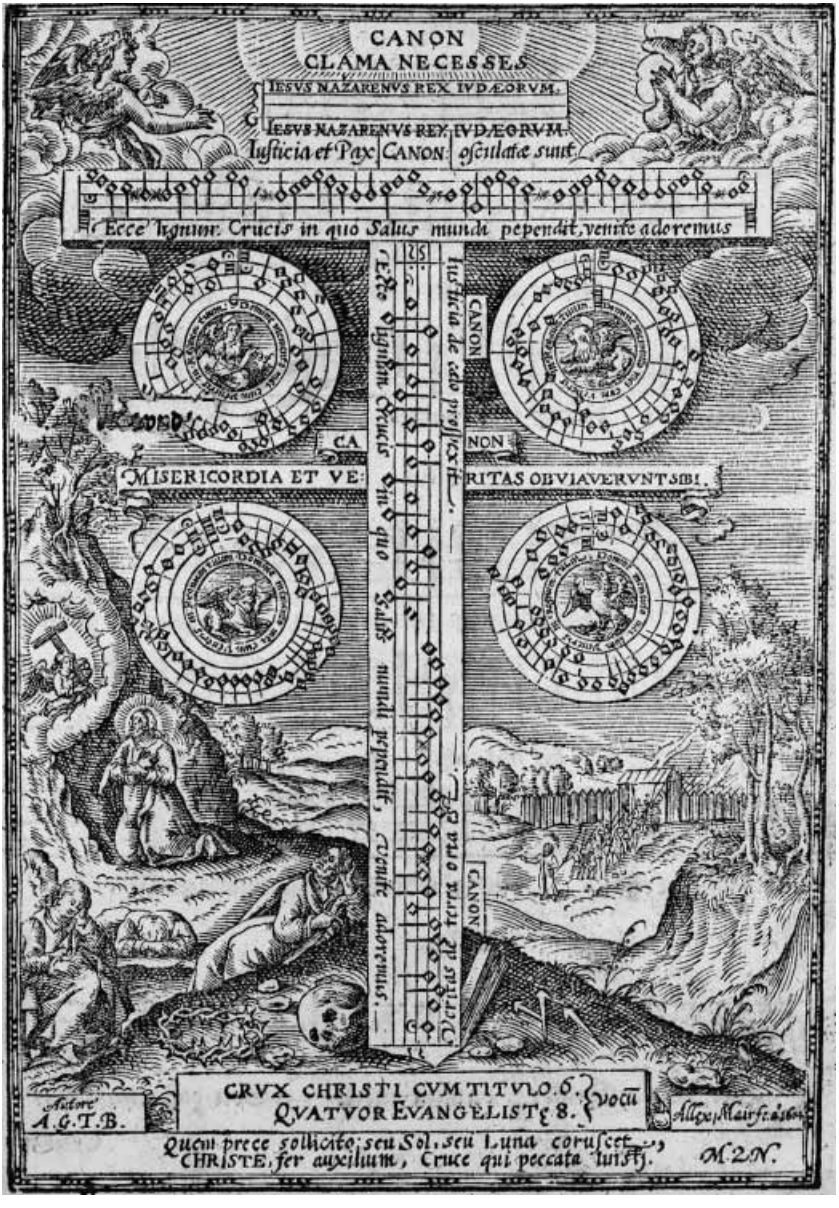


Figure 1.3 Cruciform canon, Adam Gumpelzhaimer, *Compendium musicae latino-germanicum* (1625)

harmonies" of double counterpoint and its mysterious properties which were "nearly beyond the understanding (*Verstand*) of men" – a sentiment he repeats in his other writings regarding double counterpoint and canon.[35] Werckmeister is not only astounded by the properties of double counterpoint and canon, but he attempts to account for them through allegory. One such interpretive move in the *Harmonologia* hinges on a comparison between the movement of voices in invertible counterpoint and the motion of planets, where cosmology and harmony are manifestations of the same universal principle:

> The heavens are now revolving and circulating steadily so that one (body) now goes up but in another time it changes again and comes down . . . We also have this mirror of heaven and nature [*Himmels- und Natur-Spiegel*] in musical harmony, because a certain voice can be the highest voice, but can become the lowest or middle voice, and the lowest and middle can again become the highest. One voice can become all other voices and no other voice must be added, and at the very least . . . four voices can be transformed in different ways in good harmony.[36]

In a lengthy appendix to the *Harmonologia*, Werckmeister again ponders the relationship between the cosmological order and invertible counterpoint, stating that a piece in invertible counterpoint can reach its perfection in its "inversion" (*replica*) and is therefore "A mirror of nature and God's order" (ein Spiegel der Natur und Ordnung Gottes).[37] Werckmeister gives musical form to this allegorical conception in a four-part setting of the chorale *Vater unser im Himmelreich* employing invertible counterpoint at the octave and twelfth, presenting ten of the possible permutations; he does not conclude the piece but simply writes "and so forth" (u.s.w.), suggesting that these combinations could be continued until the musical system returns to its original configuration, the progression of the voices recreating in microcosm the cycles of the planets.[38] The constant motion of the heavens is thus analogous to the perpetual revolution of the parts in a well-constructed piece of double counterpoint, whose inversions mirror the perfection of heaven and provide earthly beings with a glimpse of God's unending order, a prelude to the heavenly concert.

But the relationship between these phenomena was more than simply one of likeness: the mechanics of the heavens were not simply allegorized by double counterpoint, they were manifested in its workings. Bernhard's choice of the word *revolutio* for the contrapuntally inverted verses of *Prudentia prudentiana* is suggestive of this same celestial

[35] Andreas Werckmeister, *Harmonologia musica* (Quedlinburg, 1707; reprint, Hildesheim, 1970), 89. See also Werckmeister, *Musicae mathematicae hodegus curiosus* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1687; reprint, Hildesheim, 1972), 108; see also 137–138.

[36] Werckmeister, *Harmonologia musica*, dedication, [v].

[37] Ibid., 101.

[38] Ibid., 90–93. There are 24 possible configurations of the four voices.