



## Hermeneutik zu Johann Sebastian Bach



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Sollten Ihnen Fehler auffallen, so sind wir für Hinweise dankbar.

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# Hermeneutics of Bach

## Research and research results by Christoph Bossert

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The biblical foundation:  
Psalm 119 as an acrostic of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet

Hermeneutics  
instructional video in 12  
features  
with  
Prof. Dr h. c. Christoph Bossert  
on the Klais organ (2016) in the Great Hall of the  
Würzburg University of Music

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In Feature 9, the biblical foundation is now the subject. Psalm 119 can be regarded as the biblical foundation within the Psalms and within the Bible, because it is the longest Psalm in the Bible and has an impressive 176 verses, divided into 22 sections of eight verses each. Each of these 22 sections begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which consists of 22 letters. This is called an acrostic. As the letters continue, the next letter opens the next group of verses. Now we are astonished when we realise the following: 175 verses praise the word of God, his glory, his wisdom, his truth; but those who do not keep God's word are denounced. The last, 176th verse departs from this predetermined picture and turns our attention to our own ego:

*I am like a stray and lost sheep; seek your  
servant,  
for I will not forget your commandments.*

My thesis is that the numbers 119 and 176 - as located in Psalm 119 in its 176 verses - are the subject of Bach's compositions. My first example level is the *Seven Toccatas for harpsichord* BWV 910-916. Critical questions can now be asked, as these seven toccatas do not exist as a single work, as a cycle or as a collection intended by Bach. Could there have been eight toccatas or could there have been ten toccatas? Or have one or two or three been lost? Let's play through the idea that there are seven toccatas and that we can even determine the binding order of the toccatas using the numerical findings. None of the orders currently used in editions corresponds to what I have determined as numerical findings. In my opinion, none of the currently existing editions conveys the valid status of the order, which I see as follows:

C minor, D minor, D major, E minor, F sharp minor, G minor and G major.

What authorises me to make this assumption?

The first and last toccata, i.e. C minor and G major, have a total of  $176 \times 2$  bars; the toccatas in D major and F sharp minor, i.e. the third and third last, have a total of  $119 \times 4$  bars; the toccatas in D minor and G minor in between and the middle one in E minor have the 22nd prime number  $\times 8$  as the number of bars. The 22nd prime number is 79 and  $79 \times 2 = 158$ ; 158 is the numerical value of the name *Johann Sebastian Bach*.

What picture do we have before us now?

We see three parts, namely

- (1) the first and last toccata,
- (2) the third and third-last toccata,
- (3) the second, middle and penultimate toccata.

The clock sums of these three groups are:  $176 \times 2$ ;  $119 \times 4$ ; the 22nd prime number  $\times 8$ .

All three numbers work together in the longest psalm in the Bible: Psalm 119 in 22 verse groups. As each verse group has eight verses, this results in 176 verses. The number 22 is obviously expressed here as the 22nd prime number, because the Hebrew alphabet, through which the word of God is spoken, has no more letters, only 22 letters. On the other hand, the 22nd prime number leads us as the number 79 to the number 158, the numerical value of the name *Johann Sebastian Bach*.

So what is being said?

Psalm 119, verse 176: *I am like a stray and lost sheep.*

The following observation could be an indication of this:

Each toccata begins with a monophonic *passagio*: a single voice wanders through the tonal space until at some point more voices join in, in other words: the isolated person in relation to the world, to the community, whoever joins the individual person. The existential state of mind is then: *I am like a stray and lost sheep; seek your servant*. That is why toccatas form pairs:

- The first and last Toccata in C minor and G major with the total number  $176 \times 2$ ;
- The third and third last in D major and F sharp minor in  $119 \times 4$  bars.

The Toccata in D major clearly shows that this is indeed the case, as its first fugue is in F sharp minor. It is therefore a Toccata in D major whose first fugue is in F sharp minor and not in D major - a clear indication of its relationship with the Toccata in F sharp minor. In this respect, I am certain that this numerical finding is correct.

According to my findings, the number 176 has a very long series of 'narratives' in Bach's work, one of which concerns *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier* I and the middle third of the 48 pieces there. If we assume that there are a total of three thirds of 16 pieces each, or eight pairs of works, then the middle third begins with Praeludium in E major and ends with the Fuga in G minor. Every fourth piece within this set framework is connected to and committed to the *Eckstein* signature,<sup>1</sup> which I would like to briefly demonstrate: the first example is Praeludium in E major BWV 854

**NB 1:**

that would be Signatur *Eckstein*

The second example is Fuga in E minor BWV 855.

**NB 2:**

Here the signature *Eckstein* is heard again.

<sup>1</sup> For derivation see: *Hermeneutics on Bach*, Feature 6.

Praeludium in F minor BWV 857,



**NB 3:** 

This becomes quite obvious in the following Fuga in F sharp major BWV 858:

**NB 4:**  There, the Soggetto is opened directly by this signature.



The Praeludium in G major BWV 860 raises a few questions.



**NB 5:** 

I see  as the framework, and it is within this framework that  operates as a signature *cornerstone* and thus as the

That I am probably right about this is shown by the Fuga in G minor BWV 861 with the following theme:

**NB 6:** 

This is the head motif of this fugue, i.e.: What was previously  is now  the classic cross figure in which two motifs have room:

On the one hand: , on the other hand: ; seen together, this results in the Soggetto of the Fuga

G minor. So the cross figure results from the *Eckstein* signature in conjunction with the *Verworfenener Stein* signature. Why did I refer to this?

These fourth pieces, i.e. Praeludium in E major, Fuga in E minor, Praeludium in F minor, Fuga in F sharp major, Praeludium in G major and Fuga in G minor, have a total of 176 bars. Now it is exciting to see how many bars the pieces in between have. You work out  $139 \times 3$  bars. If I now say that the number 176 can be deduced from the 176 verses of Psalm 119, then I would have to ask analogously what is found in verse 3 of Psalm 139. Let us first visualise the wording of verse 176 in Psalm 119:

*I am like a stray and lost sheep.*

Now I come to the following statement based on Psalm 139 verse 3:

*Whether I walk or lie down, you are around me and see all my ways.*

So this is the antithesis to the statement made in Psalm 119, verse 176 about being *lost* and *straying*.

I will now continue this aspect numerically. The total number of bars - we spoke in the last feature about the plausibility of total bar numbers in Bach - the total number of bars in the *Well-Tempered Clavier I* is 2135; within this, the second third has 176 bars with every fourth piece and  $139 \times 3$  with the pieces in between.

So what about the first and third thirds? The result is:  $257 \times 6$  bars.

What can the number 257 tell us? It is not a biblical number, and yet it is frequently found in Bach. Here again, Andrea Dubrauszky has found the decisive mathematical approach with the following observation:  $257 = 11822 : 46$ . This means that if you divide the five-digit number 11822 by 46, you get 257. Now allow me to make the following comment: the sequence of digits 11822 is a numerical image that corresponds exactly to Psalm 118, verse 22.<sup>2</sup>

But what is the number 46 then? The number 46 is a biblical number and is of enormous significance in the Bible. It appears in the Gospel of John, chapter 2, when we are told about the cleansing of the temple. Jesus drives the merchants out of the temple. The Jews ask him about this incident:

*<sup>18</sup>What sign do you show us that you may do this? <sup>19</sup>Jesus answered and said to them: 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. <sup>20</sup>Then the Jews said, "This temple was built in forty-six years, and you will raise it up in t h r e e d a y s ? <sup>21</sup>But he spoke of the temple of his body.*

This makes the following clear: the number 46 is the number of the Jewish temple building on the one hand, but in the biblical interpretation, the number 46 is assigned to the *body of Jesus*, which is broken off - in his passion, suffering and death - and is raised again in the resurrection on the third day. If the number 11822 were to be interpreted as Psalm 118, verse 22, and the number 46 as the temple that is broken down and raised as the body of Jesus, what would the image look like?

*The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone [Ps 118:22].*

This statement is synonymous with:

*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up [John 2:19].*

If we relate this on the numerical level, the equation  $11822 : 46 = 257$  applies. I now say the following: If in the *Well-Tempered Clavier I*, in which the Fuga in A minor is the decisive instance, the first and third thirds count  $257 \times 6$  bars, this is a clear finding in the sense just mentioned. In addition, there is a further finding that can be taken as proof: in the 16 pieces of the first third, I now identify the centre pieces as Fuga in C sharp minor and Praeludium in D major; in the third third, the centre pieces are Fuga in A minor and Praeludium in B flat major. These four pieces together number  $1 \times 257$  bars.

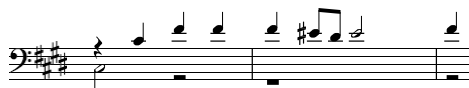
For Fuga in A minor, the 22nd subject statement, the 118th half note, the break in the rule there and the imagination of the *inverse of the inverse are* undoubtedly the decisive instance. This movement is immediately followed by Praeludium

B flat major, which begins with , what I call the signature *cornerstone*.


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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 118:22: *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.*

The symmetrical counterpart is Fuga in C sharp minor. It has three Soggetti and Soggetto 3 reads:



This corresponds exactly to the *Eckstein* signature.

Praeludium in D major now has the following character:  - three notes ascending, then descending, ascending again, descending again. In this mode, 26 bars are absolutely regular

measure through.

**NB 7:**



I say to that: Straighten up, break off, etc. What happens from bar 27 onwards?

A third voice is added as an organ point; the middle voice takes on a life of its own (bar 29), scale formations are heard which are not contained in the previously given mode; the whole piece is successively subjected to a break from bar 27 until the diminished chord is raised as a ten-part sound in bar 33. This is followed by a *confutatio figure* in 32nd-notes, in which the abrupt element of the Soggetto of the Fuga in A minor is clearly perceptible; the following bar 34 leads from the second half of the bar to bar 35 **[NB 7]**:



Now all the elements have been named that enable this event to be clearly interpreted hermeneutically and semantically in the sense of Jesus' words "*Demolish this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*" and the biblical categorisation based on the statement "*But he spoke of the temple of his body*".



## Sheet music examples

Johann Sebastian Bach, *Das Wohltemperirte Clavier* Part I, Henle Urtext edition,  
publisher's no. HN 14.

Concept  
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