



Hermeneutik zu Johann Sebastian Bach



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Hermeneutics before Bach

Research and research results by Christoph Bossert

Feature 11

The 17th century and Johann Sebastian Bach

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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Feature 11

The 17th century and Johann Sebastian Bach

"The 17th century and Johann Sebastian Bach" sounds like a paradox, because everyone actually associates Bach with the 18th century as a contemporary of George Frideric Handel. But Bach was born in 1685 - a child of the 17th century. In the previous short features, it became clear how obvious the reference to Johann Pachelbel in particular is. Pachelbel was Johann Christoph Bach's teacher in Erfurt; Johann Sebastian Bach in turn was a pupil of his eldest brother Johann Christoph in Ohrdruf.

Who was Bach's direct teacher? Pachelbel is basically his indirect teacher, Bach is Pachelbel's grandchild. However, as we now know, his direct teachers were Georg Böhm in Lüneburg and Dietrich Buxtehude in Lübeck. We know about Johann Sebastian Bach from Johann Nikolaus Forkel from 1802 - in the first Bach biography we ever have¹ - that Bach particularly appreciated the following composers and found them influential: Froberger, Fischer, Kerll, Pachelbel, Buxtehude, Bruhns, Böhm etc. So many others, possibly including Steigleder, should have been mentioned here, as well as Georg Muffat, the Italians, Grigny and others.

The compositional links to Johann Ulrich Steigleder, Frescobaldi, in particular also to Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer and Johann Pachelbel were explained by me in the previous short features. Bach's connection to Georg Böhm in Lüneburg is particularly evident in the young Bach's chorale partitas or various echoes of Böhm within what is now known as the

"Neumeister chorales" and what I call "*36 chorales*" are quite obvious. The comparison of Bach's chorale partitas with Böhm's also leads to obvious echoes - I do not need to substantiate this further here. In the following, I would like to explain the connection to Dieterich Buxtehude.

The young Bach travelled on foot from Arnstadt to Lübeck and back again, a pilgrimage so to speak. He met Buxtehude there while he was still alive; Buxtehude died shortly afterwards. Bach stayed with Buxtehude for a quarter of a year, incurring the wrath of his employers in Arnstadt. The biographies of Johann Sebastian Bach give a clear account of this; I don't need to mention it here.

I would like to talk about a work by Dietrich Buxtehude, namely his chorale arrangements for *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin* BuxWV 76. The hermeneutic reference of this work is that Dietrich Buxtehude composed a musical tomb - a *tombeau*, if you will - for the death of his father Johannes Buxtehude. The structure is as follows:

There are two chorale preludes, which Buxtehude calls *Contrapunctus*. *Contrapunctus I* is followed by what Buxtehude calls *Evolutio*, *Contrapunctus II* is also followed by an *Evolutio* and then the *Klaglied*.

¹ Johann Nikolaus Forkel: *Nekrolog auf Johann Sebastian Bach und Trauerkantate*, Leipzig 1754, in: L. C. Mizler (ed.): *Musikalische Bibliothek [...] des vierten Bandes erster Teiles*, Leipzig 1754; his: *Ueber Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke*, Leipzig 1802.

- The *evolutio [I]* is simply the inversion in fourfold counterpoint: what was treble becomes bass, what was alto becomes tenor, the tenor moves into alto, the bass into treble. This is therefore a work in fourfold counterpoint.
- The *Evolutio [II]* to the piece *Contrapunctus II* is worked as a tone-to-tone mirroring and indeed the minor third - in D minor an *F* - is then mirrored in an *F sharp*.

If Buxtehude had mirrored exactly, he would have ended up with the note *B flat* in the mirror image, where a *C sharp* was in the original. However, he transforms this *b flat* into a *b* - a major third. This is worth checking, because there is direct contact with Bach here.

First *Contrapunctus I* of the chorale prelude *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin* by Buxtehude:

NB 1:

Contrapunctus I BuxWV 76

Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr da - - hin In

Got - - tes Wil - - len.

*With peace and joy I go I go there
in God's will.
My heart and mind are comforted,
gentle and quiet.
As God has promised me,
Death has become my sleep.*

The *Evolutio [I]* now in the exchange of all voices - in fourfold counterpoint:

NB 2:

Evolutio [I]

Das macht Chri - - stus wahr Got - - tes Sohn, Der

treu - - e Hei - - land,

*This is what Christ, the true Son of God,
the faithful Saviour, does,
whom you have made known to me,
Lord,
that he may be life and
salvation, in need and also in
death.*

Now the text of *Contrapunctus II*:

*Whom thou hast provided for
all, with great favour
invite the whole world to his
kingdom.
Through your dear healing
word in every place resounded.*

Contrapunctus II

NB 3:

Den hast du al-len für-ge-stellt, Mit
gro-ßen Gna-den,

These are the first two lines of the chorale. Now the *Inversus* - Buxtehude calls this *Evolutio* - in tone-to-tone mirroring. On this organ, we can actually take this literally by using the inversus coupler and then the previous movement is transformed into the following [KB mm. 1-3]. In contrast to this is the movement composed by Buxtehude:

NB 4:

Er ist das Heil und se-lig Licht, Für
die Hei-den, zu er-leuch-ten die dich ken-nen nicht,
Und zu wei-den, Er ist dei-nes Volks I-sra-el,
Der Preis, Ehr, Freud und Won-ne.

The accompanying text reads:

*He is salvation and blessed light,
for the heathens
to enlighten those who do not know
you and to feed them.
He is the praise, honour, joy and
delight of your people Israel.*

This magnificent song is then followed by the *Klaglied* as the actual funeral music:

*Must death also deliver what no
case can deliver? Must he who
clings to my heart also escape me?*

*Alas, our fathers' gloomy
parting makes our breast too
bitter to bear.*

Such things are more than mortally painful.

NB 5:

Klag-Lied

Muß der Tod denn auch ent-bin-den, Was kein Fall ent-bin-den kann? Muß sich
der mir auch ent-win-den, Der mir klebt dem Her-zen an?
Sol-ches mehr als töt-lich schmerzt.

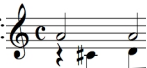
... und der Schluss ...

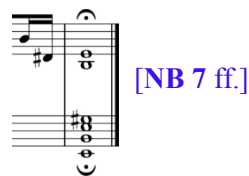
Now it is a very peculiar circumstance that what we today call the "Neumeister chorales" and the 36 chorales taken from this collection by Johann Sebastian Bach end in exactly the same way with chorale 36 *Christ, der du bist der helle Tag*:

NB 6:

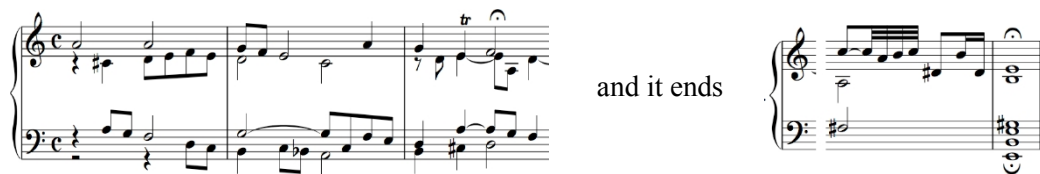
The last formulation [KB] is significant. This is how Buxtehude's *Klaglied* begins; it is in the same key.

Regardless of how one wishes to judge whether Bach and when Bach could have become acquainted with this *song* by Buxtehude - the motivic and tonal relationship between the last piece of the Neumeister chorales and Buxtehude is evident. However, the following fact should also be emphasised: It turns out that there is a symmetry in the 36 chorales of the Neumeister collection that can be conveyed via the third, the second-last and the last piece.

And it is always this motif:  or this one:



The chorale prelude no. 3 of these 36 chorales, *Das alte Jahr vergangen ist*, begins as follows:



And this is exactly the ending of the last piece. So now the proof for the second-last piece

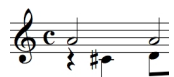


the falling sixth, and the end of the last piece in relation to it



In other words:

The third piece has its beginning



and its end



The second last piece has its beginning,



the last piece its end



And these are precisely the characteristics of Buxtehude's *Klaglied*.

Within the 36 chorales - as I call them - one can then assign symmetrical counterparts to this reference in the third, second-last and last piece . However, this is the subject of a consideration of the Neumeister chorales by Johann Sebastian Bach.²

² See on the DVVLIO homepage: (1) *Hermeneutics on J. S. Bach, Die Choräle der Neumeister-Sammlung, Lehrvideo 1-4*, esp. part 2; (2) *Hermeneutics on Bach in 12 Features, Feature 5: Die zweite Familie*; (3) *Recordings of the 36 chorales on the Wiegleb organ (1739) in Ansbach*.

Another reference is obvious:

In Bach's *Art of Fugue*, we are dealing with the category of *Contrapunctus*. This is exactly what Buxtehude calls two of his chorale preludes from the cycle *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin*. In Bach's *Art of Fugue*, however, we are also dealing with mirror fugues. *Contrapunctus 12* as well as *Contrapunctus 13* are mirrored. Buxtehude calls this mirroring *Evolutio*, in Bach it is *Forma recta* and *Forma inversa* - at least if you want to call it that.

These references are astonishing because they characterise the very young Bach on the one hand and the very late Bach up to the threshold of the year of his death, 1750, on the other. These references demand answers - but first of all they demand questions. These answers will then be circled in the complex '*Hermeneutics on Bach*'³. This much is clear: we have every reason to pursue such traces, such clues, and to honour them accordingly.

³ See *ibid*: *Hermeneutics of Bach* in 12 features

Sheet music examples

Tobi's music archive:

Johann Sebastian BACH, organ chorales from the Neumeister collection, URL:

<<https://tobis-notenarchiv.de/wp/bach-archiv/ergaenzungen/orgelchoraele-der-neumeister-sammlung/>>

Dietrich Buxtehude: *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin* BuxWV 76 In: Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707),
Sämtliche Orgelwerke ed. by Klaus Beckmann, vol. II, 2, Choralbearbeitungen
Me-W/Anhang, EB No. 6664, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden 1972

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