

Looking Forward, Looking Back: Reconsidering the Study of J. S. Bach's Chorales in the Undergraduate Curriculum

ALEXANDER SANCHEZ-BEHAR

The music of J. S. Bach has a long history in the instruction of harmony and counterpoint. His vocal chorales, in particular, are regarded as the gold standard in the study of four-part writing and harmony. While the medium of chorale writing masterfully illustrates Bach's approach to harmonizing hymn tunes, it presents myriad challenges to students. The modal tradition of the chorales, originating from the *stile antico* of the *prima pratica*, combined with their modern harmonic tonal language from the *seconda pratica*, befuddles even the keenest of admirers. Contributing to their difficult harmonic nature, Bach's manner of writing chorales suggests, at times, a greater latitude toward counterpoint principles than is found in current textbooks. Since the use of Bach's chorales as a pedagogical tool has not waned over the years, and since it presents considerable challenges for both students and teachers, I wish to indulge in a reexamination, focusing on the undergraduate curriculum in the United States.

My article will reflect on some of the shortcomings common to the study of four-part writing in the chorales and explore ways authors have coped with them in undergraduate textbooks. As a comparison to current textbooks, I look back to one of the most celebrated counterpoint treatises of Bach's time: Johann Joseph Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725).¹ Fux's treatise helps untangle critical voice-leading issues in Bach's chorales, such as voice crossing and overlap, direct motion to perfect intervals, and the resolution of the tritone. In a concluding section, I delineate some aspects in the study of Bach's chorales that I believe deserve more attention in the classroom: a finer understanding of modality and a consideration of the original text setting within the analytical process.

A Glimpse at Undergraduate Textbooks

Tonal harmony textbooks adopted in American universities starting from about the 1940s were limited in size and scope. Their topical order

¹ *The Study of Counterpoint*, ed. and trans. Alfred Mann (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

was confined to individual harmonies or classes of harmonies common in the music literature without offering a thorough exploration of stylistic differences among composers or their historical context. Walter Piston's widely distributed *Harmony* (first published in 1941) incorporated numerous short excerpts from Bach's chorales as a means to an end: an overview of the instruction of harmony.² Textbooks such as Piston's erred on the side of caution to avoid overwhelming readers with too much content. As a result, their analyses paid little attention to harmonic function (the idea, originating from Jean-Philippe Rameau's 1722 *Traité de l'harmonie*, that harmonies possess a tonic, predominant, or dominant function) or did not give readers the tools to comprehend part-writing nuances.³ Their part-writing models were too brief and rigid to handle adequately the range of scenarios found in the chorales. Moreover, textbooks such as Piston's frequently incorporated exercises that seemed disassociated from their musical tradition, such as fabricated thoroughbass activities for each harmony chapter regardless of their association (or lack thereof) with the baroque practice of thoroughbass. Some of the uncharacteristic harmonies introduced included altered dominants and extended sonorities with ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths.⁴

Undergraduate textbooks from the decades following Piston's *Harmony*, a number of which are still in publication, continue to be highly prescriptive and overly concise. A common part-writing omission in some of these textbooks is what Thomas Benjamin refers to as the free resolution of the leading tone.⁵ Bach's chorales reveal how $\hat{7}$ can resolve to $\hat{5}$ in an inner voice in a V–I progression—the strict alternative entails resolving $\hat{7}$ up to $\hat{1}$, thereby tripling the root of the tonic chord and omitting its chordal fifth. Example 1 illustrates this point in Bach's chorale *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* BWV 267. Bach's alternate resolution is reserved for cadential moments; the second phrase of the chorale

² For the latest edition, see Walter Piston and Mark DeVoto, *Harmony*, 5th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987).

³ *Treatise on Harmony*, rev. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1971).

⁴ See *Harmony*, 393 and 404.

⁵ *Techniques and Materials of Tonal Music* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975). This text is still in print in its seventh edition: Thomas Benjamin, Michael Horvit, Robert Nelson, and Timothy Koozin, *Techniques and Materials of Music*, 7th ed. (Stamford, CT: Thomson Schirmer, 2015). Some teachers anthropomorphize this concept, stating that the leading tone has been frustrated, and music theorists often opt for the latter label to describe the leading-tone-to-tonic tendency throughout common-practice harmony. See David Lewin, "Some Notes on Analyzing Wagner's 'The Ring' and 'Parsifal,'" *19th-Century Music* 16 (1992): 57.

concludes with a perfect authentic cadence. The deviant leading tone (labeled LT) is tolerated for the benefit of a complete tonic harmony and because it is less conspicuous in an inner voice.⁶

Example 1. J. S. Bach, *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* BWV 267



Doubling guidelines for chorale writing prescribed in many older harmony textbooks were inflexible and often contradictory. A study by Bret Aarden and Paul T. von Hippel on chordal doubling highlights divergent opinions in more than thirty music theory textbooks.⁷ Authors prescribe strict doubling rules to fit a harmonic series, to create a pleasing sonority, to fit or reinforce the key, or to enable good voice leading. The general consensus for doubling root-position triads favors the root; for first-inversion triads, there is wide disagreement; and for second-inversion triads, authors unanimously agree on doubling the chordal fifth in the bass. Bach's chorales frequently (but not exclusively) follow these tendencies. For instance, Bach does not restrict doubling of root-position triads to only the root. Finding deviations from these old-school norms in the chorales questions the validity of strict part-writing rules. Instructors often feel obliged to defend Bach's doubling discrepancies, perhaps explaining that they arise from the compromising nature of harmonizing a precomposed melody or are better musical choices. Michael Buchler notes that part-writing strictures, like those for doubling, invariably demand exceptions. As those exceptions add up, students "can easily

⁶ The following select textbooks acknowledge the free-resolution principle: Piston and DeVoto, *Harmony*; Stefan Kostka, Dorothy Payne, and Byron Almén, *Tonal Harmony*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2018); Robert Gauldin, *Harmonic Practice in Tonal Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); and Jane Piper Clendinning and Elizabeth West Marvin, *The Musician's Guide to Theory and Analysis*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016). Clendinning and Marvin indicate that the principle is found only at cadence points. Other books opt for a stricter approach and omit the principle altogether. See, for instance, Peter Spencer, *The Practice of Harmony*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2011).

⁷ "Rules for Chord Doubling (and Spacing): Which Ones Do We Need?," *Music Theory Online* 10, no. 2 (2004).

get buried in rules, and obedient students who doggedly memorize and adhere to ‘the rules’ frequently produce grammatically ‘correct’ yet utterly unmusical creations.”⁸ For these reasons, textbooks today adopt far less prescriptive conventions.⁹

In some respects, however, newer textbooks still overlook a few part-writing practices from the musical literature or present an oversimplified approach to part writing. Bach’s chorale *Ermuntre dich, mein schwacher Geist* BWV 454 (ex. 2) reveals another approach to resolving $\hat{7}$ freely. The first phrase, ending in m. 4, illustrates the standard model of the free resolution, with its requisite V^{8-7} –I cadence in the key of G major. In contrast, the final cadence shows how the leading tone of a dominant triad resolves up a perfect fourth, ending on the third of the tonic triad. A plausible explanation for this peculiar occurrence could be found by examining the alto line preceding the final cadence. It has maintained enough fluidity and variety to support a common tone without detracting from its independence, thereby yielding melodic interest to the tenor at the cadence. To date, I have not encountered any undergraduate textbook that states that a leading tone could resolve to *any* chord member of the tonic triad in an inner voice during a cadence, yet close examination reveals this model to be a signature voice-leading technique in Bach’s chorales.¹⁰

⁸ “When Rules Seem Less Than Golden,” *AP Central Teaching Resources* (2005), http://myweb.fsu.edu/mbuchler/Doubling_Rules.html. A revised edition of this article appears on the College Board AP Central website: <https://apcentral.collegeboard.org/courses/ap-music-theory/classroom-resources/infusing-part-writing-musical-judgment-moving-rules-guiding-principles>.

⁹ Poundie Burstein and Joseph N. Straus, *Concise Introduction to Tonal Harmony* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), as well as Clendinning and Marvin, *The Musician’s Guide*, offer concurring guidelines. Their rules for doubling are as follows: (1) for root-position triads, typically double the root, yet the third and fifth are also permitted; (2) for first-inversion triads, double anything except the leading tone; and (3) for second-inversion triads, double the bass.

¹⁰ Bach uses this voice-leading approach for dominant-tonic resolutions in minor keys as well; here, the leading tone would leap up a diminished fourth. The one caveat to Bach’s voice-leading approach here is that the dominant chord must not include a seventh. For a representative sampling from the first fifty chorales in Albert Riemenschneider’s collection, see *Schau, lieber Gott, wie meine Feind* BWV 153, *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her* from *Wahrlich, wahrlich, ich sage euch* BWV 86, *Christus, der ist mein Leben* BWV 281, *Ermuntre dich, mein schwacher Geist* BWV 454, *Christ lag in Todes Banden* BWV 277, *Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl* BWV 308, *Weg, mein Herz, mit den Gedanken* from *Liebster Jesu, mein Verlangen* BWV 32 (Riemenschneider titles this chorale after the hymn *Freu’ dich sehr, o meine Seele*), *Herr, ich habe missgehandelt* BWV 330, *Ihr Gestirn,*

Example 2. J. S. Bach, *Ermuntre dich, mein schwacher Geist* BWV 454*Contextualizing Bach's Chorales with Fux's Gradus ad Parnassum*

Another area of four-part writing in which undergraduate textbooks remain unforgiving is in voice crossing and overlap, although it is common knowledge that these arise in Bach's chorales as an exception to the rule.¹¹ One way to explain these occurrences is through Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum*. The connection of this didactic work to Bach, documented by Christoph Wolff, cannot be overstated.¹² Fux's counterpoint exercises reveal voice crossing and overlapping textures more profusely even than Bach's chorales. Curiously, Fux does not draw attention to these instances, but rather maintains that his formulated examples "cannot be better."¹³

ihr hohlen Lüfte from the *Christmas Oratorio* (Riemenschneider titles this chorale after Johann Frank's hymn *Gott des Himmels und der Erden*), *Nun bitten wir den heiligen Geist* BWV 385, *Ach, was soll ich Sünder machen* BWV 259, and *Ich hab in Gottes Herz und Sinn* from *Sie wedern aus Saba alle kommen* BWV 65 (Riemenschneider titles this chorale *Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit*). Albert Riemenschneider, *371 Harmonized Chorales and 69 Chorale Melodies with Figured Bass* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1941).

¹¹ Bach normally creates voice crossing when the tenor gradually climbs to a high range and creates voice overlap when the tenor arrives at a high point via a large leap.

¹² Wolff notes that the only surviving theoretical book in Bach's personal library with an ownership mark signed by Bach himself was *Gradus ad Parnassum*. *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 333–34. Equally notable, the first German translation of Fux's treatise was published, with commentary, by Bach's student Lorenz Christoph Mizler in 1742. Wolff surmises that as the translated version "emanated directly from Bach's own circle . . . it must be assumed that Bach was among its immediate initiators." *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 93–94.

¹³ *The Study of Counterpoint*, 114. For a representative sampling of voice crossing in first species, see Fux's figures 166–68 in *The Study of Counterpoint*, 114–15.

This leads me to consider the following questions: how does Bach's method of four-part writing relate to one of the most significant counterpoint treatises written during his career, and how do current textbooks reflect Fux and Bach's four-part writing ideals? On the whole, recent undergraduate textbooks that incorporate one or more chapters on two-voice counterpoint as a precursor to four-part writing adopt Fux's model for counterpoint. In subsequent chapters on four-part writing, however, the strict approach to two-voice counterpoint must be more accommodating because of the additional voices, a point that is not made clear. In *The Complete Musician*, for example, Steven G. Laitz introduces four-part writing with these words: "voice-leading rules are derived from the principles that we learned . . . concerning two-voice counterpoint."¹⁴ Fux himself loosens the strictures of two-voice counterpoint in the second and third sections of his treatise, which deal with species counterpoint in three and four parts.

Fux treats the instruction of three- and four-voice counterpoint in a more holistic manner that, under the right conditions, tolerates bending the rules of two-voice counterpoint. His treatise instructs that principles of four-voice composition go hand in hand with three-voice composition because complete triads are included in both forms. Fux therefore outlines the differences between two-voice counterpoint and counterpoint with additional voices primarily in his discussion of three-voice counterpoint. Attending to first species using three or more parts, Fux permits a leap to dissonance in the upper voices, something that is not tolerated in two-voice counterpoint; he counsels that "rules should be observed reckoning not from the bass alone but, if possible, also from any one part to any other, although this is not very strictly applied in composition of several parts."¹⁵ Other instances of permitted rule breaking in first species include direct motion to a perfect consonance (examples of direct fifths) and the irregular resolution of the tritone inherent in the vii^o–I progression.¹⁶ Example 3 from Bach's chorale *Aus meines Herzens Grunde*

¹⁴ *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Theory, Analysis, and Listening*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 174.

¹⁵ *The Study of Counterpoint*, 76.

¹⁶ *The Study of Counterpoint*, 76–80. Like Fux, authors today sensibly permit direct motion to a perfect consonance if the soprano line moves by step. This is an essential harmonic component of the perfect authentic cadence when the melody descends to the tonic. See Fux, *The Study of Counterpoint*, 78. Another part-writing nuance where most textbooks concur with Fux is the irregular tritone resolution A4–P4 in the vii^o–I chord progression, contrary to the natural resolution d5–3 or its inverted form A4–6. See

BWV 269 illustrates how these principles, which are not permitted in two-voice counterpoint, freely appear in Bach's chorales. Measures 3 and 5–6 illustrate the irregular A4-P4 intervallic resolution between alto and tenor parts, and mm. 6–7 make use of direct octaves between bass and soprano while the melody descends by step to the tonic. My underlying point is that while undergraduate textbooks illustrate the same end result as example 3, there is no discussion of how the part writing diverges from two-voice counterpoint, which leads to confusion for the student.

Example 3. J. S. Bach, *Aus meines Herzens Grunde* BWV 269

The image shows a musical score for J. S. Bach's chorale 'Aus meines Herzens Grunde' (BWV 269). The score is in 3/4 time, G major, and consists of a treble and a bass staff. The melody is in the soprano part. Annotations include 'direct octaves' above the final measure, 'A4 P4' below the alto and tenor parts in measure 5, and 'G: I6 vii°6 I' and 'I vii°6 I6' below the bass staff in measures 6 and 7 respectively.

Other forms of rule bending are not made explicit in current textbooks. In second species, Fux permits parallel perfect fifths on consecutive downbeats, and in fourth species, parallel perfect fifths on consecutive upbeats. Furthermore, outlining a minor-seventh chord in a single voice appears without correction in fourth species, which contradicts the principle of moving by step in the opposite direction of a large leap to create balance and fill in the gap.¹⁷ In Bach's chorales, seventh-chord bass arpeggiations surface sporadically, with ornamental passing notes.

I do not wish to suggest that teachers throw away the compass, but rather that we think of counterpoint rules as being more malleable than the strict rules of two-voice species counterpoint permit. Nor do I wish to suggest that teachers today are not integrating these principles in the classroom. But what I observe from textbooks is that the transference from two-voice counterpoint to four-part writing is not always smooth or fully explicit, which can lead to confusion. Textbooks that introduce species counterpoint before four-part writing could elaborate on instances where four-part writing principles deviate from two-voice counterpoint.

Spencer, *The Practice of Harmony*; Benjamin, *Techniques and Materials of Tonal Music*; Miguel A. Roig-Francolí, *Harmony in Context* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011); and Clendinning and Marvin, *The Musician's Guide*.

¹⁷ See *The Study of Counterpoint*, 102. Leonard Meyer advocates the gap-fill principle in *Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 145–57.

To the extent that thinking in this manner affects teaching methods, I believe that assessment strategies ought to be reevaluated; administering exams to test students' knowledge of strict part writing is not enough to instill a mastery of counterpoint. The kinds of musical considerations Fux highlights in four-part writing do not translate seamlessly into exam rubrics. While a consideration of four-part writing rubrics lies outside the scope of my article, I believe that grading procedures should discern the egregiousness of each part-writing anomaly in a holistic manner that permits some leeway with regard to doubling and the resolution of inner-voice leading tones at cadences. For that reason, and in addition to examination methods, model compositions that integrate counterpoint principles enable students to synthesize theoretical concepts into the creative process, which is important to instill the kind of critical thinking that the music theory classroom deserves.

Further Considerations for the Classroom

Anyone engaged in the study of Bach's chorales must contend with the notion of modality at some point. Students who peruse various chorales outside the controlled classroom setting quickly realize that four-part writing textbook models are not comprehensive enough to elucidate every aspect of Bach's vast harmonic language. The majority of melodies from Bach's chorales are derived from other composers, some of whom date back to the Renaissance.¹⁸ Bach's harmonizations of modal melodies reveal how sixteenth-century modality, composing with ecclesiastical modes, and eighteenth-century tonality coexist.¹⁹ Consider how Bach employs modality in example 4, drawn from *Erbarm' dich mein, o Herre Gott* BWV 305. From the outset, the repeated E-minor triad establishes its sense of tonic, which is affirmed through cadential patterns in mm. 4 and 13 that conclude with a Picardy third. The cadential ascent from the subtonic harmony to the tonic is characteristic of the Phrygian mode at play in this excerpt. Lori Burns regards the cadences centered on A as subsidiary plagal embellishments of the overarching E ending, with its

¹⁸ For information on the origins of Bach's chorale melodies, see Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach*, trans. Ernest Newman (London: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1911). Albert Riemenschneider asserts that many of these melodies were in current use by the Lutheran church. 371 *Harmonized Chorales*, v.

¹⁹ This has been a topic of inquiry by Lori Burns. She challenges Heinrich Schenker's tonal analysis of *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ* BWV 314 and other harmonizations by Bach in favor of a modal reading. See "J. S. Bach's Mixolydian Chorale Harmonizations," *Music Theory Spectrum* 15 (1993): 144–72.

Example 4. J. S. Bach, *Erbarms' dich mein, o Herre Gott* BWV 305

The image displays a musical score for J. S. Bach's chorale "Erbarms' dich mein, o Herre Gott" (BWV 305). The score is presented in two systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a single melodic line. The first system begins with a measure number of 1. The second system begins with a measure number of 7. The music is written in G major (one sharp, F#) and 4/4 time. The melody is characterized by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together, and features various accidentals (sharps, flats, and naturals) throughout. The bass line provides a steady accompaniment with a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes. The notation includes various musical symbols such as clefs, time signatures, accidentals, and note heads with stems.

VI–vii–I cadential progression.²⁰ An alternative reading in the key of A minor would be problematic. First, the chorale would begin with a minor dominant triad, lacking a leading tone. When leading tones do support the harmony on E, they occur at cadential moments. Moreover, the chorale comes to a close inconclusively with a half cadence. In a multi-movement work, half and Phrygian cadences occasionally mark the end of an inner movement (as in the Brandenburg Concerti, for example); however, open-ended cadences do not create a sense of closure, which undermines one of the functions of the chorales as the standard closing number of a cantata.

Numerous textbook authors introduce ecclesiastical modes in connection with more recent music—early twentieth-century impressionism—without feeling bound to historical chronology. Perhaps this pedagogical decision is influenced by the *prima pratica* gradually fading out of practice in favor of the tonal style. Some textbooks, however, pair ecclesiastical modes with major and minor scales and even feature one or more excerpts from Renaissance repertoire. Textbooks that embrace modality from the outset can incorporate Bach's modal chorales as a preface to the study of species counterpoint and subsequently to four-part writing.

A final perplexing aspect of the study of Bach's chorales in the undergraduate curriculum is the absence of the original German text, along with English translation.²¹ Examining chorale settings without regard for their original texts presents an incomplete view of the work, strips away associations between music and text, and removes the compositional process from analytical inquiry.²² Consider Bach's chorale *Nun, ich weiss, du wirst mir stillen* from *Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht* BWV

²⁰ "J. S. Bach's Chorale Harmonizations of Modal Cantus Firmi" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1991), 2:44. Burns and Eric Chafe, *Analyzing Bach Cantatas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pinpoint Bach's modal chorales, focusing on Phrygian and Mixolydian modes. For another clear instance of Bach's Phrygian chorales, see *Komm, Gott Schöpfer, heiliger Geist* BWV 370; for a Mixolydian harmonization, see *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ* from the cantata of the same name BWV 91.

²¹ Robert Gauldin, *A Practical Approach to Sixteenth Century Counterpoint*, rev. ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2013), designed for upper-undergraduate and graduate students, is a notable exception, as it integrates the craft of text setting into the instruction of counterpoint, using a non-species approach.

²² Scholarly research on text-music relations in Bach chorales is scant. As Eric Chafe notes, "studies of individual Bach cantatas that are both illuminating and detailed are few in number; and those that endeavor to integrate the analysis of both text and music along with their substantial historical backgrounds are fewer still." *Analyzing Bach Cantatas*, ix.

105, for voice, strings, and basso continuo; the SATB parts are provided in example 5a, and a segment of the complete score is included in example 5b.²³ A translation of mm. 1–5 reads “Now, I know, Thou shalt quiet my conscience that torments me,” and mm. 6–11, “Thy good faith will fulfill what Thou Thyself has said.”²⁴ In his analysis of this chorale, Robert L. Marshall suggests that the ascending scalar motion of the bass in mm. 6–11 presents an antithesis to the descending motion in mm. 1–5.²⁵ Marshall notes that the chromaticism of the first six measures is replaced by a more straightforward realization of diatonic harmonies in the minor mode and that the harmonic context is motivated by the text. The tormented conscience of the opening six measures is contrasted by the comforting words of the subsequent phrase. These kinds of textual considerations can give students a greater compositional insight into the interdependence of Bach’s harmonic progressions and specific affective gestures. The lament motive in the opening is a characteristic musical depiction of negative affect, one that baroque composers often utilized in opera.²⁶ The use of harmonies from the melodic minor mode in the initial ascent of the second line is meant to uplift worshippers and provide a different glimpse of “light at the end of the tunnel,” more typically associated with the Picardy-third ending of a minor-mode chorale.²⁷

²³ This chorale harmonization of the famous hymn *Jesu, der du meine Seele* is not included in modern compilations of Bach’s chorales. The harmonies in this chorale would be incomplete (and out of character) if performed a cappella. This should be regarded as an example of six-part counterpoint. Concerning counterpoint of more than four voices, Fux concludes his treatise as follows: “Understand that to him who masters four part composition the way to composition with more voices is already made quite clear; for as the number of voices increases, the rules are to be less rigorously observed.” *The Study of Counterpoint*, 138–39.

²⁴ Translations from Richard Stokes, ed., *J. S. Bach: The Complete Cantatas* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 171.

²⁵ “How J. S. Bach Composed Four-Part Chorales,” *Musical Quarterly* 56 (1970): 207–9.

²⁶ Ellen Rosand notes that early baroque opera composers, notably Claudio Monteverdi and Francesco Cavalli, employ the lament motive during moments of particularly intense expression in a narrative structure. See “The Descending Tetrachord: An Emblem of Lament,” *Musical Quarterly* 65 (1979): 346–59.

²⁷ Robert Hatten attributes a special meaning to Picardy-third endings as either syntantic, as in perfect closure, or poetic, as in “light at the end of the tunnel.” *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 39.

Example 5a. J. S. Bach, *Nun, ich weiss, du wirst mir stillen* from *Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht* BWV 105, vocal part

1 Nun, ich weiss, du wirst mir stil - len mein Ge wis - sen, das mich plagt.

6 Es wird dei - ne Treu er - fül - len, was du sel - ber hast ge - sagt.

Another author who presents a different, yet novel, approach to text-interpretative inquiry is Michael E. Broyles.²⁸ Broyles opines that theological notions from eighteenth-century Lutheran orthodoxy impact the manner in which Bach sets text to music. He notes that a fundamental aspect of the Lutheran religion is what he refers to as the inner struggle of the individual. Tied to this theme is the dualistic concept of good (epitomized by God) versus evil (exemplified by Satan). Broyles remarks that the presence or absence of conflict in the text of Bach's chorales determines the nature of the harmonies, which are integrated in a complementary manner. Generally speaking, in the chorales the absence of conflict is expressed with straightforward harmonic progressions or ascending motion in what he refers to as the inner and outer dimensions, while the presence of conflict is associated with complex harmonic progressions or downward movement. Broyles's analytical approach measures these inner and outer dimensions with melodic movement in steps and harmonic movement around the circle of fifths. Using these kinds of distances to gauge relative proximity, Broyles equates nearness with light, God, and straightforward progressions, and remoteness with darkness, Satan, and complex chords.

²⁸ "Text Interpretation in Johann Sebastian Bach's Four-Part Chorales," *Revue belge de Musicologie/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* 22 (1968): 64–85.

Example 5b. J. S. Bach, *Nun, ich weiss, du wirst mir stillen* from *Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht* BWV 105, full score

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Soprano

Alto

Tenore

Basso

Basso Continuo

Nun, ich weiss, du wirst mir stillen

Nun, ich weiss, du wirst mir stillen

Nun, ich weiss, du wirst mir stillen

Nun, ich weiss, du wirst mir stillen

Nun, ich weiss, du wirst mir stillen

5 7 6 6 6 5 6 4

2 4 2

Uncovering other text-music connections can shed light on various facets of Bach's compositional process. It is not surprising, for instance, that Bach's plagal cadences are set in major keys and associated with uplifting scripture, such as in his chorale *In dulci jubilo* BWV 368 (*In dulci jubilo, Your praises hearty show*).²⁹ Additionally, a combined text-music study can clarify peculiar instances of part writing within the chorales. Malcolm Boyd points out several cases of forbidden parallel fifths, which he attempts to explain in two ways: (1) "either the text is at these points corrupt"; or (2) "Bach has not spotted the consecutives and would have corrected them if he had."³⁰ Boyd does not elaborate further on his first

²⁹ Translation from Charles Sanford Terry, ed., *The Four-Part Chorals of J. S. Bach* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, [1929] 1964), 204. According to Jason Terry, baroque composers had begun to expand the use of plagal cadences to include new text in addition to "Amen." Terry notes that musicians then and afterward, like the nineteenth-century choirmaster Thomas Helmore, regarded the quality of the plagal cadence to be gentle and beautiful and thus of a complementary nature to the text. "A History of the Plagal-Amen Cadence" (DMA diss., University of South Carolina, 2016), 44–45, 68, 121.

³⁰ *Harmonizing Bach Chorales* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1967), 22.

point; instead, he references several instances of parallel fifths, such as in the penultimate measure of *Jesu, der du selbstest wohl* BWV 355. Yet, the text near the end, portraying a somber mood and referencing Satan and death, offers one explanation for the use of normally forbidden parallel fifths. Interestingly enough, Bach sets the chorale in a major key because the overall message serves as a cry for salvation.³¹ While these comments only begin to scratch the surface, making a habit of analyzing chorales alongside their texts would undoubtedly make Bach's compositional choices more meaningful and logical for students.

Conclusion

Contemporary composer John Adams once asserted that Bach's technical abilities as a composer are overwhelming.³² It is unrealistic to believe that teachers can instill a deep knowledge of part-writing principles in the chorales without giving them greater attention. Teachers are cognizant that it is challenging to find passages that fit neatly into undergraduate textbook models in terms of voice leading, chord progressions, and functional tonality. This should not alarm students, because compositional practice is often more flexible than textbooks allow. To this extent, the so-called "golden rules" of part writing are dynamic and ought to be considered holistically. Textbooks and instructors must continue to dovetail discussions of counterpoint into the study of harmony and four-part writing in a manner that resonates with Bach's compositional mind. Instruction of Bach's chorales would undoubtedly benefit from being more inclusive by contrasting modality versus tonality and by integrating the reciprocal relationship between text and music. It is clear that we can look forward to a more robust pedagogical approach only by looking back to Bach and his contemporaries.

Abstract

The music of J. S. Bach has a long history in the instruction of harmony and counterpoint. His vocal chorales, in particular, are regarded as the gold standard in the study of four-part writing and harmony. While

³¹ My interpretation of the light versus dark duality resembles Broyles's study, though I have extended his idea to the realm of key structure and voicing considerations.

³² 2010 NEA Opera Honors Interview, <http://youtu.be/8dmu6JQadYs>. Adams reflects on the creative process, stating that composing is "a very mysterious thing. If you look at a composer like Brahms, for example, or Bach, their technical chops were just overwhelming. And yet, what happens in the actual act of creation is kind of unknowable."

the medium of chorale writing masterfully illustrates Bach's approach to harmonizing hymn tunes, it presents myriad challenges to students. The modal tradition of the chorales, originating from the *stile antico* of the *prima pratica*, combined with their modern harmonic tonal language from the *seconda pratica*, befuddles even the keenest of admirers. Contributing to their difficult harmonic nature, Bach's manner of writing chorales suggests, at times, a greater latitude toward counterpoint principles than is found in current textbooks. In this article, I wish to indulge in a reexamination of Bach's chorales as a pedagogical resource, focusing on the undergraduate curriculum in the United States.

My article reflects on some of the shortcomings common to the study of four-part writing in the chorales and explores ways authors have coped with them in undergraduate textbooks. Tonal harmony textbooks adopted in American universities starting from about the 1940s were limited in size and scope. Moreover, doubling guidelines were inflexible and contradictory. These kinds of textbooks presented an oversimplified approach to part writing that lacked some important voice-leading nuances. Fortunately, recent undergraduate textbooks have remedied many of these deficiencies.

As a means of comparison to current textbooks, I look back to one of the most celebrated counterpoint treatises of Bach's time: Johann Joseph Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725). This influential didactic work was the only surviving theoretical book in Bach's personal library with his personal ownership mark, and the first German translation was published by one of Bach's own students. Fux treats the instruction of four-voice counterpoint in a holistic manner that, under the right conditions, tolerates bending the rules of two-voice counterpoint. Fux's treatise helps untangle critical voice-leading issues specific to Bach's chorales.

Lastly, I delineate some aspects of the chorales that I believe deserve more attention in the classroom. Inasmuch as the melodies from Bach's chorales stem from the sixteenth-century *stile antico*, a finer understanding of how modality and tonality coexist is needed. A final perplexing aspect of the study of Bach's chorales is the frequent omission of the original text. I believe textual considerations can shed light on various facets of Bach's compositional process, such as the interdependence of his harmonic progressions and specific affective gestures.

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