

## **The Chorales in *Matthaus Passion* by J. S. Bach (part I) – semantic comparative perspective**

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**Abstract:** *Matthäus Passion* represents the greatest axiological creation of Johann Sebastian Bach, being one of the genre vocal-symphonic works amongst those addressing the theme of the Passions of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The work has two major sections and presents a string of considerable chorales, especially from the point of view of the ethos they promote at certain moments of the work: the key-moments, the most important moments from a theological standpoint.

Key-words: *time, semantic, meaning, symbolism, chorale*

### **1. Preliminary considerations on terminology**

„Bach treated all musical genres, except theater" (Duhamel 1970, 13), but his vocal-symphonic creation includes his most important masterpieces: *Missa*, *Matthaus Passion* and *Johannes Passion*. *Matthäus Passion* represents the greatest axiological creation of Johann Sebastian Bach, being one of the genre vocal-symphonic works amongst those addressing the theme of the Passions of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The work has two major sections and presents a string of considerable chorales, especially from the point of view of the ethos they promote at certain moments of the work: the key-moments, the most important moments from a theological standpoint.

Although chorales had a tradition in the Catholic Church, „in Martin Luther's Reform choral has acquired particular importance, especially for educating people in the practice of worship" (Marinescu 2008, 144). Fundamentals of Bach's thinking reflects "the specific essential, polyphonic discourse, deep understanding of protestant chorale" (Constantinescu et al. 2008, 63). The chorales represent

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variations on a theme, the variations (tonal, harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and textual) highlighting the different semantics that each chorale promotes at a moment very well characterised from a theological and musical point of view. "Coral structure is fixed, it reflects the correspondence between verse and music" (Bughici 1974, 81), so it is so important the semantic analysis capable of incorporating both.

## 2. Theoretical and analytical perspectives

**1. CORAL 1 (no. 3) - Herzliebster Jesu:** *Herzliebster Jesu, was hast du verbrochen, dass man ein solch scharf Urteil hat gesprochen? Was ist die Schuld, in was fur Missetaten bist du geraten?* (Beloved Jesus, what has thou done wrong, that they have pronounced so hard a sentence? What is thy guilt, into what sort of misdeeds hast thou fallen?).

### Herzliebster Jesu

#### Evangelium:

Matthäus Passion - 3

Da Jesus diese Rede vollendet hatte, sprach er zu seinen Jüngern:

"Ihr wisset, daß nach zwei Tagen Ostern wird, und des Menschen Sohn wird überantwortet werden, dass er gekreuziget werde."

The musical score for the chorale "Herzliebster Jesu" is presented in two systems. The first system shows the beginning of the piece, starting with a "Rezitativ" (recitative) in the treble clef, followed by the "Choral" in the bass clef. The lyrics are: "Herz - lieb - ster Je - su, was hast du ver -". The second system continues the choral part with the lyrics: "bro - - chen, dass man ein solch scharf Ur - teil hat ge -". The score includes treble and bass staves with notes, rests, and bar lines, and a key signature of one sharp (F#).

Ex. 1. – J. S. Bach *Matthaus Passion*, chorale „Herzliebster Jesu”

The chorale presents an atmosphere of piety full of love and respect for the supreme Sacrifice that was to take place, the tonality being B minor and the melodic course of voices, almost gradual: *Iar după ce a sfârșit toate aceste cuvinte, a zis Iisus către ucenicii Săi: Știți că peste două zile va fi Paștile și Fiul Omului va fi dat să fie răstignit.* (Mathew 26, 1-2). (When Jesus had finished this speech, He said to His disciples: You know that in two days it will be Passover, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified).

**2. CORAL 2 (no. 16) - Ich bin's:** *Ich bins, ich sollte büßen, an Händen und an Füßen gebunden in der Höll. Die Geißeln und die Banden und was du ausgestanden, das hat verdient meine Seel* ("O Welt, sieh heir dein Leben," verse 5) (It is I. I should atone, my hands and feet bound in Hell. The scourges and the fetters, and all that thou didst endure, this has my soul earned).

### Ich bin's

Matthäus Passion - 10

**Evangelium:**

Und am Abend setzte er sich zu Tische mit den Zwölfen; und da sie aßen, sprach er:  
 "Wahrlich, ich sage euch, einer unter euch wird mich verraten."  
 Und sie wurden sehr betrübt und huben an, ein jeglicher unter ihnen, und sagten zu ihm:  
 "Herr, bin ich's?"

Chor

Choral

Herr, bin ich's? Ich bin's, ich soll - te bü - ßen, an Hän - den und an

Fü - ßen ge - bun - den in der Höll'. Die Gei - ßeln und die Ban - den, und

Ex. 2 – J. S. Bach, *Matthaus Passion*, chorale „Ich bin's”

The second chorale occurs after the moment when the Saviour Jesus Christ announces that the one who will sell Him is among those who were partaking in the

Last Supper: *Și ucenicii au făcut precum le-a poruncit Iisus și au pregătit Paștile. Iar când s-a făcut seară, a șezut la masă cu cei doisprezece ucenici. Și pe când mâncau, Iisus a zis: Adevărat grăiesc vouă, că unul dintre voi Mă va vinde. Și ei, întristându-se foarte, au început să-I zică fiecare: Nu cumva eu sunt, Doamne? (Matei 26, 19-22).* (And the disciples did as Jesus had commanded them, and prepared the Passover lamb. And in the evening He sat at dinner with the twelve. And as they ate, He said: Truly I say to you: one among you will betray Me. And they were very troubled and began, each one among them, to say to Him: Lord, is it I?)

The chorale offers the answer to the question launched by each of the apostles (*I am the one who will sell you*), the A-flat major tonality and the affirmative, clear tone being elements that emphasise the certainty of each of the sinners when recognising the role of seller of the Saviour through his sins.

**3. CORAL 3 (no. 21) - Erkenne mich:** *Erkenne mich, mein Hüter, mein Hirte, nimm mich an! Von dir, Quell aller Güter, ist mir viel Guts getan. Dein Mund hat mich gelabet mit Milch und süßer Kost, Dein Geist hat mich begabet mit mancher Himmelslust* ("O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden," verse 5) (Thy mouth has refreshed me with milk and sweetmeats. Thy spirit has favored me with many a heavenly longing).

The third chorale highlights the moment when the Saviour Jesus Christ announces not only His Passions but also the Resurrection, through a musical discourse centred on E major tonality, balanced, bright, full of hope: *Și după ce au cântat laude, au ieșit la Muntele Măslinilor. Atunci Iisus le-a zis: Voi toți vă veți sminti întru Mine în noaptea aceasta căci scris este: "Bate-voi păstorul și se vor risipi oile turmei". Dar după învierea Mea voi merge mai înainte de voi în Galileea.* (Matei 26, 30-32). (And when they had spoken the benediction, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to them: tonight you will all be angry at Me. For it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." When, however, I rise again, I shall go before you into Galilee).

## Erkenne mich

### Evangelium:

Matthäus Passion - 15

Und da sie den Lobgesang gesprochen hatten, gingen sie hinaus an den Ölberg. Da sprach Jesus zu ihnen:  
 “In dieser Nacht werdet ihr euch alle ärgern an mir; denn es steht geschrieben: Ich werde den Hirten schlagen, und die Schafe der Herde werden sich zerstreuen. Wann ich aber auferstehe, will ich vor euch hingehen in Galiläam.”

Ex. 3 – J. S. Bach, *Matthaus Passion*, chorale „Erkenne mich“

**4. CORAL 4 (nr. 23) - Ich will hier bei dir stehen:** *Ich will hier bei dir stehen: verachte mich doch nicht! Von dir will ich nicht gehen, wenn dir dein Herze bricht! Wenn dein Herz wird erblassen im letzten Todesstoss, alsdenn will ich dich fassen in meinen Arm und Scloss.* (I will stay here with You, do not scorn me! I will not leave You, even as Your heart breaks. When Your heart grows pale at the last stroke of death, then I will hold You fast in my arm and bosom).

The fourth chorale refers to the moment when the Apostle Peter, although he believes he will not be capable of betrayal, hears the prophecy of the Saviour regarding a triple betrayal: : *Iar Petru, răspunzând, I-a zis: Dacă toți se vor sminti întru Tine, eu niciodată nu mă voi sminti. Zis-a Iisus lui: Adevărat zic ție că în noaptea aceasta, mai înainte de a cânta cocoșul, de trei ori te vei lepăda de Mine. Petru i-a zis: Și de ar fi să mor împreună cu Tine, nu mă voi lepăda de Tine. Și toți ucenicii au zis la fel.* (Matei 26, 33-35). (Peter answered, however, and said to him: Even though everyone will be angry at You, yet I will never be angry. Jesus said to him: Truly, I say to you: tonight, before the cock crows, you will deny Me

three times. Peter said to him: even if I must die with You, I will not deny You. All the other disciples also said the same).

### Ich will hier bei dir stehen

Matthäus Passion - 17

#### Evangelium:

Jesus sprach zu ihm:

“Wahrlich, ich sage dir: In dieser Nacht, ehe der Hahn krähet, wirst du mich dreimal verleugnen.”

Petrus sprach zu ihm:

“Und wenn ich mit dir sterben müsste, so will ich dich nicht verleugnen.”

Desgleichen sagten auch alle Jünger.

Rezitativ                      Choral

{ Ich will hier bei dir ste - hen: ver - ach - te mich doch  
Von dir will ich nicht ge - hen, wenn dir dein Her - ze

nicht! } Wenn dein Herz wird er - blas - sen im letz - ten To - des -  
bricht!

Ex. 4 – J. S. Bach, *Matthäus Passion*, chorale „Ich will hier bei dir stehen”

**5. CORAL 5 (nr. 31) - Was mein Gott will:** *Was mein Gott will, das gescheh allzeit, sein Will der ist der beste: zu helfen den'n er ist bereit, die an ihn glauben feste. er hilft aus Not, der fromme Gott, und zuchtiget mit Massen. Wer Gott vertraut, fest auf ihn baut, den will er nicht verlassen.* (What my God wills always occurs, His will is the best, He is ready to help those who believe firmly in Him. He gives aid in need, this righteous God and punishes with measure. Who trusts in God, builds upon Him firmly, God will never abandon).

The fifth chorale occurs after the moment when the Evangelist renders the words of the Saviour in the garden of Gethsemane, those referring to watch and prayer, the only ones capable of delivering one from temptation.

The music of the chorale unfolds in D major tonality, promoting a sound atmosphere that renders the balance and the serene character of the one who fulfils the will of God: *Privegheați și vă rugați, ca să nu intrați în ispită. Căci duhul este*

*osârduitor, dar trupul este neputincios. Iarăși ducându-se, a doua oară, s-a rugat, zicând: Părintele Meu, dacă nu este cu puțință să treacă acest pahar, ca să nu-l beau, facă-se voia Ta* (Matei 26, 41-42) (Stay awake, and pray, so that you do not fall into temptation! The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. For a second time He went away, prayed and said: My Father, if it is not possible that this Cup pass away from Me, then I will drink it; thus may Your will be done).

### Was mein Gott will

*Evangelium:*

Matthäus Passion - 25

Zum andern Mal ging er hin, betete und sprach:

"Mein Vater, ist's nicht möglich, dass dieser Kelch von mir gehe, ich trinke ihn denn, so geschehe dein Wille."

The image shows a musical score for the chorale "Was mein Gott will" by J.S. Bach. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is labeled "Rez." (Vocal) and "Choral". The vocal line is in G major and common time, with lyrics: "Was zu mein Gott will, das g'scheh' all-zeit, sein die hel-fen den'n er ist be-reit, die". The choral line is in G major and common time, with lyrics: "Will' der ist der be- - ste; } er hilft aus Not, der an ihn gläu-ben fe- - ste; }". The second system continues the choral line with the same lyrics: "Will' der ist der be- - ste; } er hilft aus Not, der an ihn gläu-ben fe- - ste; }".

Ex. 5 – J. S. Bach, *Matthaus Passion*, chorale „Was mein Gott will”

Matthäus Passion ends, within the first part, with a chorale integrated into an impressive chorus: *O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde groß, Darum Christus seines Vaters Schoß, Äußert und kam auf Erden; von einer Jungfrau rein und zart für uns er hie geboren ward, er wollte der Mittler werden, den Toten er das Leben gab und legt dabei all Krankheit ab bis sich die Zeit herdrange, daß er für uns geopfert würd, Trüg unser Sünden schwere Bürd Wohl an dem Kreuze lange.* ("O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde groß," verse 1) (O mankind, mourn your great sins, for which Christ left His Father's bosom and came to earth; from a virgin pure and tender He was born here for us, He wished to become our Intercessor, He gave life to the dead

and laid aside all sickness until the time approached that He would be offered for us, bearing the heavy burden of our sins indeed for a long time on the Cross).

### 3. Conclusions

“Because of the many formative licenses, tonal standards (established by the classical tradition) will end, versatile evaluation of the structure will enhance the ambiguity of the system” (Duțică 2004, 11); but ambiguity measures the amplitude of the musical discourse’s structure.

J. S. Bach is a result of the trends of his time, is more than an individual, "a personality that appropriates all knowledge and all the soul music of the time, he perfected and transmit to posterity, concentrating the science of polyphony, the protestant spirit of Reform and the light of Renaissance" (Ciomac 1974, 9). His work will always be an unmistakable landmark in the music history analysis.

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