

TEXTUAL ILLUSTRATION IN J.S. BACH'S SETTINGS OF *O LAMM GOTTES, UNSCHULDIG*

Derek Remes
Eastman School of Music
derekremes@gmail.com
www.derekremes.com
May, 2015

J.S. Bach set the tune *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* six times in his surviving works. [slide 2] The settings range from early to late works, and vary widely in instrumentation, length, and complexity. Because this tune was always paired with the same text, we are afforded an opportunity to compare how Bach treated the same text in a variety of contexts. As we will see, Bach consistently used chromaticism, diminished seventh chords, and suspensions—that is, dissonance—at certain poignant words, implying that these techniques carried specific extramusical meaning in these contexts. These associations between text and compositional technique enhance our understanding of Bach’s musical vocabulary.

[Slide 3] The text of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* was written by Nicolaus Decius in 1531.¹ There are three Low German hymns ascribed to him, each intended to replace portions of the Latin Ordinary: *Hyllich ys Godt de vader* (Sanctus), *Allein Gott in der höh sei ehr* (Gloria in excelsis), and *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* (Agnus Dei). These three texts are the oldest evangelical hymns, preceding Luther’s first chorale texts by almost a year.² *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* is an expanded translation of the *Agnus Dei*, the more literal German translation being the text *Christe, du Lamm Gottes*, both shown in the table. *Christe, du Lamm Gottes* is paired with a different tune, which Bach set in the *Orgelbüchlein* as BWV 619, and again in the cantata *Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn*, BWV 23. Decius's adaptation, *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig*, is longer than the original *Agnus Dei* and has more vivid imagery. The text is of course associated with Passiontide, specifically Good Friday. In fact, Bach used it in the first movement of the St. Matthew Passion. As *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* is an adaptation of the *Agnus Dei*, the text was also commonly sung during the Eucharist portion of the mass.

¹James Mearns, Rev., *A Dictionary of Hymnology: Setting forth the Origin and History of Christian Hymns of all Ages and Nations*, ed. John Julian (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1908), 285.

² Hans-Christian Müller and Hans-Otto Korth, “Decius, Nikolaus” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com:80/subscriber/article/grove/music/07365/>.

[Slide 4] The tune, also written by Decius, first appeared in Johann Spangenberg's *Gesangbuch* of 1545. Although the original is in cut time, Bach often set the tune in 3/2 time. The tune is arranged as a repeated *Stollen*, followed by the *Abgesang*, or AAB form—also called bar form. The tune is believed to have been adapted from plainchant, but no sources indicate from where exactly. [Slide 5] I believe a likely source for the tune of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* may be the *Agnus Dei* from Mass Nine in the *Liber Cantualis*, also known as the *Missa Cum Jubilo*. Compare the chant version on the left with the original on the right. Similarities in contour and mode are summarized below.

[Slide 6] Bach's six settings of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* are once again summarized on slide 6. I will discuss them in this order, each increasing in length and complexity. The first is BWV 401, an uncategorized chorale harmonization. [Slide 7] Whether this chorale comes from a larger work, such as a cantata, is unknown, but the melody is *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig*. Bach highlights the word "verzagen," or "despair," in m.8 by using chromaticism in the bass voice to create the only diminished seventh chord in the setting. While this detail in itself may seem trivial, it is Bach's consistent use of dissonance at precisely this word in the subsequent settings that reveals the association between textual meaning and compositional technique. (As an aside, "chromaticism" in this paper refers exclusively to augmented primes, not half steps; the latter occur frequently, while the former are more rare in Bach, and therefore, more significant.)

[Slide 8] The next setting is BWV 1085, sometimes catalogued without a BWV number. It is comprised of two parts, both manualiter: a *Vorspiel* and a chorale. The source is the Lowell Mason collection at Yale University, a manuscript called the *Johann Günther Bach Abschrift*, which is distinct from the Neumeister collection. Johann Günther Bach (1703-1756) was the son of Johann Christoph Bach (1673-1727).³

³ Christoph Wolff, ed., et. al., *The New Grove Bach Family* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997)

[Slide 9] The *Vorspiel* of BWV 1085 sets the tune in the soprano voice, and as in the previous chorale setting, the only instance of chromaticism occurs in the bass voice at the text, “verzagen,” or “despair,” in mm.40-41. There are two diminished seventh chords in m.41, the only instances of this harmony in the setting. [Slide 10] The second part of BWV 1085, the chorale, also highlights the text “verzagen” through use of dissonance. The bass voice rests in mm.21-22, and then enters on the word “verzagen,” leaping the “anguished” interval of a diminished fourth, followed by yet another a diminished seventh chord, the only occurrence in this setting. Let’s listen to Ton Koopman play this passage beginning in m.21 at the text “sonst müßten wir verzagen.”

[Slide 11] The next setting of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* is BWV 1095 from the Neumeister Collection. The word “verzagen” is treated this time through 9-8 and 7-6 suspensions in the soprano and tenor voices respectively in m.37, shown in grey circles. This is the only instance in the piece where the tune in the soprano is dissonant with the bass—on a whole note, no less. Let’s listen to William Porter perform this piece beginning in m.31. (Admittedly, Porter’s registrational choice of a 4’ flute downplays the sense of “despair” in this passage. In my mind, his choice evokes more of the innocence of Christ as the Lamb of God.)

[Slide 12] The next setting of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig*, BWV 618, comes from the *Orgelbüchlein*. Unique in the settings thus far is the use of the tune in strict canon at the twelfth. Canons may symbolize the image of “following,” for instance that the faithful are to follow in Christ’s example. Notably, even the accompanimental voices in this setting are partially canonic.

[Slide 13] As in previous settings, the only instance of chromaticism occurs in the bass voice (played by the left hand) in mm.13-14, precisely at the word “verzagen.” Let’s listen to George Ritchie perform this passage, beginning in m.9.

[Slide 14] Canonic imitation is a feature shared with BWV 619 of the *Orgelbüchlein*, the more literal translation of the *Agnus Dei—Christe, du Lamm Gottes*. And just like *O Lamm Gottes*,

unschuldig, even the accompanimental voices are partially canonic. Here is an excerpt of William Porter playing BWV 619.

[Slide 15] The cantata *Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn*, BWV 23, also makes use of the tune *Christe, du Lamm Gottes*.⁴ As might be expected, Bach makes use of three-part canonic imitation at one point in BWV 23. Therefore, it seems both translations of the *Agnus Dei—Christe, du Lamm Gottes* and *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig*—called for canonic treatment in Bach’s mind. This may be a reference to the traditional three-fold repetition of the *Agnus Dei* chant, which itself symbolizes the trinity, in addition to the image of “following” Christ.

[Slide 16] The next setting of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* comes from the Leipzig Autograph, BWV 656. This is the longest setting so far because each of the three verses are set separately, with the chorale in the soprano, tenor, and bass, respectively. The most significant textural change occurs at the start of verse three with a new accompanimental figure in triplet subdivision (this is not shown on the slide). Bach even marks a new time signature, 9/4, for the upper voices only, while the tune in the bass continues in 3/2. 9/4 corresponds to the perfect tempus and greater prolation of Medieval mensural notation, both symbolic of the trinity. Whether Bach intended that here is uncertain.

Bach downplayed the word “verzagen” in the first two verses of BWV 656, saving the most expressive device for the last verse. In m.104 the meter signature changes back to 3/2 in the upper voices, not at the beginning of the chorale phrase in the pedal, as might be expected, but precisely at the words “wir verzagen.” Moreover, specifically at the word “verzagen,” Bach employs the only instance of chromaticism in the pedal, a true “corruption” of the chorale tune and a vivid

⁴Christoph Wolff, ed., *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 101. This cantata was first performed on February 2, 1723, the Feast of the Purification and last Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent and thus, *tempus clausum*, when no concerted music could be performed. BWV 23 served as Bach’s “audition” piece for the vacant position of Cantor at St. Thomas’s, Leipzig, along with the cantata *Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwölfe*, BWV 22.

representation of the word “despair.” In fact, all three upper voices participate in the “despairing” figure, saturating the entire texture with diminished seventh chords, even resulting in an augmented sixth chord on the last beat of m.105, still while on the word “verzagen.” The augmented sixth and the diminished seventh were the most dissonant harmonies in Bach’s vocabulary, rendered even more striking on whatever unequal temperament Bach was accustomed to. BWV 656 is the only instance in the six settings of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* in which the chorale tune itself is subject to chromaticism, and it occurs precisely at the word “verzagen.” Let’s listen to Wolfgang Rübsam play this setting, beginning at m.99.

[Slide 17] The sixth and final setting of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* is the first movement of the St. Matthew Passion, which was likely first performed on Good Friday, 1727.⁵ The structure of the text is organized as questions and answers, which Bach scores between the two choruses. The first choir calls out, “Behold!” and the second choir answers, “Whom?” The first choir’s reply is, “The Bridegroom,” referring to Christ. A parallel structure ensues: “Behold Him! — How? — As a lamb!” At the moment when “As a lamb” is answered, a chorus of sopranos, accompanied by the organ, begins singing the unornamented chorale tune *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig*. Thus, Bach uses the tune itself to answer the chorus’ question “How should we behold him?” The reply is embedded in the text of the *Agnus Dei*—“We should behold him as the Lamb of God.” The word “verzagen,” however, when it does occur later in the piece, is not highlighted through the use of chromaticism or dissonant harmony, as in the previous settings. Apparently, a detailed textual illustration of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* was not Bach’s intent in this setting. [Slide 18] Let’s listen to Paul McCreesh and the Gabrieli Players perform this passage. (I have included a moving cursor because of the small size of the score.)

⁵ Robin A. Leaver, “St Matthew Passion” in *Oxford Composer Companions: J. S. Bach*, ed. Malcolm Boyd (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1999), 430. “Until 1975 it was thought that the St Matthew Passion was originally composed for Good Friday 1729, but modern research strongly suggests that it was performed two years earlier.”

Bach's high regard for the chorale *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* is evidenced by the number of times he chose to set it. While settings vary widely in length and complexity, Bach almost always chose to highlight the meaning of the word "verzagen," or "despair." He did so through chromaticism and diminished seventh chords in the miscellaneous chorale and organ settings; double suspensions in the Neumeister version; chromaticism in the *Orgelbüchlein*, combined with canonic imitation; and he saturated the entire contrapuntal fabric with dissonance, even "corrupting" the tune itself in the Leipzig Autograph. Taken together, Bach's consistency in dealing with the word "verzagen" in all settings but the St. Matthew Passion implies that chromaticism and dissonance had a distinct extra-musical meaning for Bach: that of despair, suffering, pain, etc. The advantage of analyzing music with a text is that the association between certain words and specific compositional techniques, such as chromaticism, is more overt. This does not mean, however, that every instance of chromaticism in Bach—even in works without text—signifies despair in a literal sense. It only means that in the context of a chorale setting, Bach associated chromaticism and dissonance with the image of suffering. Thus, it would seem that Bach followed his own advice to his students that they play chorales "not just offhand but in accordance with the *Affekt* of the words."⁶

⁶ Christoph, Wolff, ed., *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 336.