
Jennifer Dieffenbach
Queen's University Belfast

This book is a musico-theological exploration of Bach’s response to the Gospel of John and to a series of contemporary theological works. It offers the reader an insight into a specific epoch in Bach’s life that demonstrates a deep affinity for Johannine themes, tonal exegesis and a set of texts centred on demonstrating the love of the crucified Saviour for his disciples.

In this volume Eric Chafe, known for his detailed work on tonal allegory in the musical works of J. S. Bach, investigates Bach’s application of Johannine theology in his *St John Passion* and the cantatas for spring 1725. This book is a musico-theological exploration of Bach’s response to the Gospel of John and to a series of contemporary theological works. Chafe demonstrates Bach’s ability to set apart the liturgical season in question – the ‘great fifty days’ from Easter to Pentecost – mirroring key themes from the book of John through tonal ambitus and instrumentation.

Chafe sees the Gospel of John as more ‘spiritual’ than the Synoptic Gospels: the transition from the era of Jesus to that of the disciples and the Holy Spirit is depicted through themes of struggle, sin and discouragement in a world without Jesus. Somewhat surprisingly, Chafe is the first author to recognise Bach’s use of the same themes to spiritualise Christ’s Passion message in the cantatas following Easter 1725. Not simply a response to the John narrative, the cantatas and passions were conceived as an exposition of God’s *Rath*, which Chafe defines as God’s plan for the salvation of mankind.
Chafe’s detailed examination of the *St John Passion* within the framework of the Johannine theology uncovers a plethora of similarities between it and some identifiable theological sources, such as those by John Jacob Rambach (1693–1735) and August Hermann Francke (1663–1727).\(^1\) Drawing extensively on Lutheran theological writings, Chafe concludes that Bach is the ‘end point’ – the final, most important (albeit not the last) filter through which many of these Johannine-infused Passion themes find voice.

As many have done before him, Chafe ponders the reason for Bach’s shift from the 1724–1725 chorale cantatas to those following, which many have perceived as not having a clear scheme. He finds an answer in the Johannine texts Bach set for this season and, in so doing, identifies a matrix for Bach’s masterpieces. In Chafe’s view, Bach planned to create a sequence of cantatas that were to follow and link to the *St John Passion* in 1724, but for unknown reasons, he composed them the following year. Chafe believes that, although the *St John Passion* may exhibit the *Christus Victor* theme, which distinguishes it from the *St Matthew Passion*, it also demonstrates God’s *Rath* and is therefore indebted to the writings of Rambach and Francke, whose Passion meditations stem from this concept.

Chafe focuses his analysis of the St John Passion on the theory of tonal ambitus, which expands the idea of tonal theology he explored in his earlier books. By introducing the reader to the specifics of Rambach and Francke, as well as those of the twentieth-century theologian Raymond E. Brown, Chafe produces a coherent, if somewhat dense, discussion of the Passion as being rooted in fifth relationships and a tonal direction reflective of the unfolding of the Passion story. Jesus’s identity, his departure and the benefit of his death for the believer do not seem to have a musical pattern unless the listener considers the Johannine concept of paradox. Chafe infers that Jesus’s majesty, understood under the ‘curtain of His suffering’, is demonstrated through the descent/ascent scheme and the modulatory direction from sharps to flats.\(^2\) Thus the aspects of Jesus’s death that most epitomize paradox are musically highlighted by tonal commentary. As part II ends, the reader wonders if Chafe should perhaps have considered dividing this book into two parts. Since the first part of the book forms a logical whole, it may have been appropriate to publish the material as two separate books, especially considering the abundance of information and intensity of discussion.

Texts for Bach’s spring 1725 cantatas came from two sources: Leipzig poet Mariane von Ziegler (1695–1760) and an unknown librettist. Chafe’s assumption that Bach and the librettist must have worked together to highlight the extension of themes from the *St John Passion* seems appropriate. Since these cantatas move further from Easter towards Pentecost, Chafe’s identification of their purpose as a spiritualisation of John’s message to the disciples is also a keen one. Although the themes of paradox, life in a fallen world and that of light and darkness may have been featured more prominently in this series of cantatas in order to strengthen its link to the Passion, Chafe does not consider the fact that the pre-Easter cantatas (BWV 182, 53, 80a, 21, 22) also exploit these themes. This demonstrates one of the difficulties in attempting a study of the kind


Chafe has undertaken as the identification of possible motives and themes carries with it the danger of assuming that certain themes are only found in one part of Bach’s musical oeuvre and not in others.

Chafe’s analysis of the spring 1725 cantatas has produced some important contributions to Bach scholarship: it has established a link between two genres (passion and cantatas), deepened our understanding of Bach’s instrumental choices with respect to theological motives, and drawn attention to theological sources that help facilitate a more coherent understanding of the context or Passion culture in which these works were created. Thus, Chafe has offered the reader an insight into a specific epoch in Bach’s life that demonstrates a deep affinity for Johannine themes, tonal exegesis and a set of texts centred on demonstrating the love of the crucified Saviour for his disciples.

Although the highly complex analysis and vagueness of certain definitions has led to the occasional disjointedness of discourse, overall, Chafe places his readers directly where they ought to be – back in the daily life of Bach as he may have known it. The reader is re-acquainted with Bach the theologian, who conceived a musical sequence that centred on the transition from Easter to Pentecost as a picture of the suffering yet victorious Saviour who came to aid the faithful in their struggle to overcome the world.

Date published: 7 January 2016