

THE SYMBOLS OF THE BACH PASSACAGLIA

by David Rumsey

Ever since commentaries on the Bach organ works began to appear, the Passacaglia¹ in c minor, BWV 582, has attracted considerable attention. At first this was part of the general Bach discussions (Forkel 1802, Spitta 1873) but in the 20th century it became an increasingly significant topic in specialised volumes (Schweitzer 1905, Grace c.1922, Keller 1950, Williams 1980).

THE PROBLEMS

In the course of these discussions many questions have been raised as to whether it was destined as a pedal harpsichord, or organ work, whether a break was intended between passacaglia and fugue, what to do about registration, or whether to take the opportunity for a cadenza after the Neapolitan Sixth chord. Then, with a growing awareness from the 1930's onwards that Bach's music contained many number and figure symbols: was the Passacaglia based on a Fibonacci series? Had it some other *hidden* proportion or structure? Did anything lie behind the fact that Bach seems to have borrowed part of the theme from Raison? Why did he revert to a non-modulating passacaglia when Buxtehude and others had already introduced thematic modulation to this form and modulation was so important to Bach's creative process?

Its unique features, monolithic nature, Neapolitan Sixth, conjunction of passacaglia and fugue, and other details, pose many questions. Even attempts at a simple analysis have led to a profusion of widely differing views.

Most recently both Michael Radulescu² and Piet Kee³ have suggested possible symbolic interpretations of the work. Peter Williams⁴ and many others tend to dismiss such approaches⁵. Radulescu suggested that certain ratios of the Passacaglia's structure represent the form and proportions of the Cross. Kee sees in it a musical realisation of material in Werckmeister's *Paradoxal Discourse* of 1707.

Whatever truth may lie in these approaches, there remains a lingering problem: these analyses have generally focused solely on the passacaglia, ignoring the fugue. Yet there is an equally fertile field which is worthy of investigation in the fugue: its double subject, symmetry of major and minor entries, attachment to the passacaglia, climactic Neapolitan Sixth chord at the end, and the total absence of thematic material in the final section.

In seeking to comprehend what might lie behind this great work, we will need to reconcile all of these disparate elements. We will need to treat the work as an entity, not simply confine ourselves to part of it. In particular we must scrutinise closely all elements of *Affektenlehre* and *Figurenlehre* found in it. Any special symbols of proportion or numerology which may illuminate the passacaglia should also elucidate the fugue. If this does not happen, then our interpretation will be incomplete, unbalanced or even misleading.

ANALYSIS

A convenient summary of passacaglia analyses published between 1966 and 1979 has been provided by Williams⁶. This table reveals certain agreement in broad analytical terms, and many differences in the finer detail.

The question as to whether we are dealing with a “theme and 20 variations” or a set of “21 variations” is evidently a point of fundamental difference. But why should that be? Although the potential for variation is as traditional and valid in a passacaglia as it is in any music, we are dealing in this instance not with a conventional, let us say Mozartian, concept of “theme and variations”, but with an earlier ostinato bass form.

In a passacaglia our attention must be centred on the periodic repetition of the bass-theme and what happens above it rather than how the theme itself is changed. Such change is but one of many possibilities here. It is only rarely that variety in the guise of (bass)-thematic change is the musical point made by such a form. Does the actual variation of this ostinato theme (on the rare occasions when it actually does vary) have special significance⁷.

So let us distance ourselves from inappropriate or confusing terminology, however conventional this may be, and speak more accurately of the 21 repetitions of 8-bar *ostinato segments* of the *passacaglia*, of 12 *thematic entries* in the *fugue*, and of miscellaneous textures from unisons, through multi-stranded counterpoint, to thick chordal blocks, encountered at various points. In the passacaglia these are generally, but not exclusively, superstructures erected above the theme. In the fugue they are fairly conventional thematic appearances.

The fine detail of this, the musical engineering of its construction, will determine the true form of the work for analytical purposes. Using such an approach, which has the added virtue of helping integrate both written notation and aural-perception, we stand to gain a far clearer view of form than attempting to fit inappropriate musical templates over it.

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The title, *Passacaglia*, hints at a single work. The conjunction of passacaglia and fugue in this piece tends to support such a view of it. Thus our first impression, perhaps the ultimate broad-view here, is that of a single, unified work containing a number of clear, but lesser divisions. This is not at all inconsistent with the analyses quoted in Williams above, but it does include the fugue. The true “monolith” view is simply:

PASSACAGLIA

A slightly closer view of the structure of this work will be that of a two-sectioned form: a passacaglia followed by a fugue (the separation observed as a major change in musical style, not one of silence, between the two sections).

To relegate the work to a standard *Prelude and Fugue* format is inaccurate, for this prelude (passacaglia) and fugue are joined rather than separated. The theme is common to both. Such elements distinguish it markedly from traditional prelude and fugue forms. The coupling of a passacaglia with a fugue in this way was, to all intents and purposes, unheard of in the repertoire prior to Bach's era⁸. Thus the second view:

passacaglia	fugue
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Considering formal structure more closely still, we might propose a third manner of dividing it up, one consisting of 3 sections. The first 16 ostinato statements are continuous. The major restatement of the 17th ostinato is a significant turning point which separates that which follows it very clearly from that which has preceded it. There is total unanimity in all the analyses quoted by Williams that this is a significant turning point in the work. Thus a tripartite plan unfolds:

Part One	Change	Part Two	Change	Part Three
From start to end of 16th ostinato statement		From re-entry of the pedal at 17 th ostinato to Neapolitan Sixth		Fugue

We may go even further: when we examine the existing analyses once again, but more closely look at the fugue. We may thus discern five well-defined sections: three in the passacaglia and two in the fugue.

	Passacaglia			Fugue	
Section	1	2	3	4	5
Bars ⁹	1-81	81-129	129-169	169-286	286-293
Thematic entries:	1-10	11-16	17-21	22-33	
Thematic Units	10	6	5	5+2+5 (12)	0

It is possible to go into more detailed breakdowns of themes and sections and come up with further schemes¹⁰. But the five-sectioned form given above is balanced and generally supported in other analyses. Let us elaborate on it a little further for clarification.

THE FIVE BLOCKS OF THE PASSACAGLIA

Section one commences with the pedal solo announcement of the ostinato, its 10 pedal appearances being reasonably consistent:





The fourth section is the double-fugue. This is notable, amongst other things, for its direct connection with the passacaglia. The 12 thematic entries are arranged quite symmetrically: 5 in minor keys, 2 in major, and then another 5 in minor. The theme is curtailed to four bars, but a second theme is introduced against it, thus creating a double-fugue.



The constriction on modulation found in the passacaglia is now lifted. The notable arrest of all motion at the Neapolitan Sixth chord in bar 286 brings this section to a dramatic end.

The fifth section, whilst much shorter than the others, is rather concentrated and radically different: it is almost entirely in the tonic major, the theme is totally absent¹¹, the pedal to all intents and purposes utilises the entire two-octave range generally available on Bach's pedal-boards, and the part-writing increases in the penultimate bar until 7 notes are present in the final chord.



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This 5-sectioned division would thus appear to be a reasonable basis for analysis of the work. It is certainly more realistic than the bland *Prelude and Fugue* model and very well-supported in the table quoted in Williams.

- ▶ All commentators agree that the 17th ostinato entry is a major watershed;
- ▶ A strong consensus also exists in identifying the change between the 10th and 11th segments;
- ▶ It identifies the 3 sections of the passacaglia and the two of the fugue, which is not included in the Williams' table, but its division into two substantive parts cannot seriously be disputed on account of the partition made by the Neapolitan Sixth chord.

PASSACAGLIA AND ORGELBÜCHLEIN - SHARED FIGURES OF SPEECH?

Like all true 18th-Century music, that of Bach - and his Passacaglia can be no exception - “speaks to us” rather than “paints pictures” - as Nikolaus Harnoncourt so eloquently puts it¹². This *language* of 18th-Century music makes a fascinating study, its importance perhaps as yet not fully realised. Yet still today many musicians only seem to skirt around the periphery of *Affektenlehre* and associated matters, both in their training and performances. Writers of considerable importance have treated us to discourses on this subject since at least the sixteenth century. Amongst the most significant sources are Werckmeister, Heinichen, Mattheson, Quantz, and Marpurg. Representative researchers and publishers of the past century have included Unger, Müller-Blattau, Schering, and Smend. Paul Henry Lang comes close to a comprehensive treatment of it in his major study of Handel¹³.

The more we contemplate this material, the more we realise that there was a developed language in the music of Bach and his contemporaries. To understand it is the key to fathoming the *expression* of the music. *Affektenlehre*, *Figurenlehre*, musico-pictorial, rhetorical and other representational devices, including symbolism, are inextricably enmeshed in its fabric and structure.

To help us understand this mode of musical expression we are particularly fortunate whenever written text can be associated with musical figure. Nowhere is this linkage more evident in Bach's music than in his organ chorales (especially the *Orgelbüchlein*), Cantatas and Passions¹⁴. In these works we are most fortunate in being able to associate written text directly with musical figure¹⁵. Other, quite well-established, instances exist where we can see how Bach has transferred this language to certain “free” works (which lack textual associations): for example the E-flat major Prelude with its Trinity symbolism, or the references to chorales in the Prelude and Fugue in C major, 9/8-time, (Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr; Vom Himmel hoch).

It follows that the Passacaglia may well be “talking to us” rather than “painting pictures”. Many writers have already sensed this, and if we wish to understand such an added dimension to the work, then we will need to break Bach's code and interpret his musical language. This can be a rather obscure and difficult process since we have very little direct evidence with which to work¹⁶. However the *Orgelbüchlein*, a contemporary collection of chorale settings to

the Passacaglia¹⁷, provides us with an extremely useful key to the language of Bach's musical expression¹⁸.

SECTION THREE

Taking the above 5-sectioned analysis of the Passacaglia as our basis, we note how section 3, a block of 5 ostinato repetitions, commences dramatically with the same *Figur* as that found in the chorale setting on “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland” which stands at the opening of the Orgelbüchlein. This is a particularly poignant moment in the Passacaglia: the pedal ostinato is recalled in its original bass *gestalt* after almost disappearing in a chain of isolated notes into the soprano part. The striking accompaniment to this reinstated pedal theme is the falling arpeggiated figures which gather into thick chords before resolving¹⁹.



Clearly, in this *Orgelbüchlein* example, we are dealing with a strong musical reference to the theology implicit in the chorale text: God descending from heaven to earth, the Advent concept. The musical line descends and the range of the relevant manual figure is basically an octave: the octave is symbolic of the relationship between heaven and earth, the *sphaera octava* concept of the ancients perhaps, but in any event used often enough by Bach elsewhere²⁰ as a representational device when this kind of association is relevant.

In the Passacaglia the Advent-motive stands, not only so very strikingly at the head of this central section of the work (irrespective of whether we regard the form as 3- or 5-sectioned), but the thematic appearance involved here is the 17th, i.e. 16 come before it and 16 after it²¹, making this entry absolutely “central” to the total of 33 thematic entries in the entire work.

16 thematic entries	“Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland” reference	16 thematic entries
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If the Passacaglia is indeed “speaking” to us, then we cannot avoid recognising that this figure, and its location at such a central point, must represent something very important. If a Christian theological concept is involved, then its association with “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland” would strongly suggest Advent: God's coming down to earth from heaven in human form.

It is, of course, far easier to see how a text has been translated into music than vice versa. The *Orgelbüchlein* manifestation of this “Advent” musical motive is demonstrable, whereas the *Passacaglia* occurrence is suggestion. Bach may well have intended different symbols. This is the point which is so frequently made by commentators such as Williams. To this extent it cannot be denied that all such deductions, particularly if they stand alone, must be ambivalent²². We will therefore need to look about for supporting evidence to be sure that we have interpreted the musical *Figur* correctly in any particular instance.

There is a significant degree of support for an “Advent” hypothesis when we examine the remaining music of section three. Its second ostinato segment, the one following the “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland” reference, has a series of remarkable rising-and-falling scale passages:



These bear a striking resemblance to both *Figur* and *Affekt* of “Vom Himmel kam der Engel Schaar” - one of the *Orgelbüchlein's* Christmas chorales. In this we are dealing with a representation of Jacob's vision - “a ladder, set up on earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it”²³.



Mention of Angels around Advent and Christmas is part of the theology concerned, a concept frequently expressed musically in the 18th-century from German Chorale settings to French Noël²⁴ or Handels' *Messiah*.

The final three of the five ostinato segments in this section are particularly interesting: they seem to overflow with a kind of suppressed excitement. This quality is achieved through the joy-rhythms of the manual parts (identified as *dactyls* in the Williams analysis - musically or poetically promoters of joy-feelings), and also the slightly-modified pedal theme, which at

one point adds an *Affekt* of “greater joy” by shortening the off-beat crotchets into quavers (as if it cannot contain itself and wants to “leap for joy”). But this eloquent, rhythmically-expressed elation contrasts oddly with and is strongly conditioned by the curiously “restricted” melodic writing of the manual parts: changing notes which seem to rotate in “musical circles”, always returning to the note from whence they started.

We may also observe at this point how Henry Purcell, in his anthem “O Sing unto the Lord” used a virtually identical figure to set the words “round world” in the bass aria “Tell it out among the heathen”. Purcell, in common with most great composers of this era, also used *Figuren*. We first encounter this “round world” motive in a bass aria:

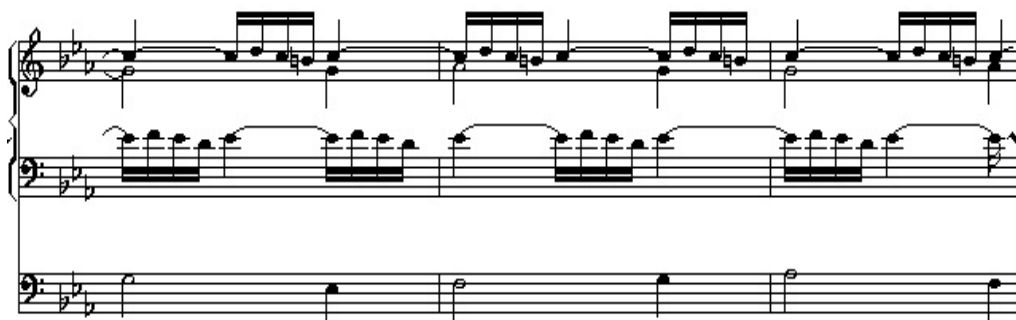


Then, a few bars later, in the choral extension of this solo, the setting of the word “round” bears an extremely close relationship to the figures we are dealing with in the Passacaglia²⁵:

Purcell:



Passacaglia:



Here there is a tarrying, a restraining, an awaiting for release, evident in these musical figures. They stand partially in contrast to, and partially in support of, the *Affekten* of joy being expressed elsewhere in this passage. This seems to fit the feeling of anticipation generated by Advent.

If Bach's intention in section three was to symbolise the meaning of Advent and Christmas through a combination of *Figur* and *Affekt*, then he could hardly have chosen a more appropriate representation than this: from the *Figuren* of “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland”, through those of “Vom Himmel kam der Engel Schaar”, then on to the (penitential) joy, expectant excitement, and “round world” suggestions, implied in the final three ostinato segments: we could have a fine musical distillation of the Advent narrative here. The liberation which then follows in the fugue, with its thematic changes and fresh musical freedoms, is the essential counterfoil. This allows the five ostinato segments of section three to function as a musical expression of Advent-theology: both passacaglia and fugue are brought by this link into a musical and theological symbiosis.

The concentration and central location of these Advent symbols will tend to confirm the work as a representation of Christian theological conviction: the coming of Christ into the world is the central tenet on which all Christianity is based.

Taking into account monumentality and uniqueness we will therefore need to find an appropriate theological concept which incorporates Advent as its central doctrinal fulcrum, then aligns with the symbols, *Affekten*, and *Figuren* found in the rest of the work.

We might recall here some of Bach's representational or symbolic essays in other related fields, for example Liturgy (b-minor mass), Trinity (Clavierübung III), Christmas (Canonic Variations), and Passion (Johannes, Matthäus). The major collections of organ chorales (*Orgelbüchlein*, Schübler, the “Eighteen”) also involve strong liturgical and/or theological considerations. Although fringed on in such collections (and in some of the Cantatas), the theology of Old and New Covenants was not specifically treated. Advent is an absolutely central and indispensable part of Covenant doctrine.

This suggests that Bach might have conceived this work, not just as a piece of “abstract” organ music, but as a musical symbol of faith. Should this be true, then excavating this aspect of it will allow understanding and evaluation of it as an example of high Christian religious art. It will also condition and focus musical interpretations of it by performers.

MUSICAL LANGUAGE FOR COVENANT THEOLOGY

A dedicated work based on the Covenants might have been expected from the quill of a composer whose strong religious beliefs are everywhere apparent in his music. There are diverse instances where Covenant references are made in Bach's music.

The *Orgelbüchlein* version of the chorale “Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot” is a bass- and ostinato- oriented work like the Passacaglia (although obviously too brief to deal with anything more than the basic “Commandments” aspect of Covenant theology). We note the “language” used: it is a basso-ostinato form. Such music does seem to be expressive of laws

carved out of stone and applied immutably.

The Cantata, Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit, BWV 106, now thought to pre-date the Passacaglia²⁶, gives us a rather more comprehensive account of Covenant doctrine than the *Orgelbüchlein* prelude, especially in the chorus “Es ist der alte Bund”, with its quite conservative style of fugal writing:

Es ist
Es ist der al - te Bund Mensch

This is followed by a remarkable transition into a more modern (operatic?) style of aria at the soprano entries, which takes place over this fugal embroidery to the words “Ja komm, Herr Jesu, komm”:

Ja ja ja komm ja ja ja komm ja ja ja
ja komm ja komm Herr Je - su ja komm

The Advent-symbols of the coming of Christ are here developed with (“human”) sighing slurred-pairs of notes, but particularly through the dramatic downward melodic sweep of the last bar (example below). This puts us once again in mind of “downward-moving” symbols of the Advent music already discussed. There can be no doubt that Bach is reflecting the heaven/earth downward reference of the text in this musical passage:

Herr Jesu komm! ja, ja, ja, komm ja komm Herr Je - su,

More “new” symbols are introduced at the conclusion with its “romantic” melisma, “pianissimo” marking, coupled with the “freshness” of a-naturals and sextuplets (in the same beaming configuration as seen in the sextuplets of the 17th Passacaglia segment). These all combine to form a most original, extraordinarily poignant, and musically revitalised conclusion to the movement. It starts out as “old” and “restricted”, about as “legally bound”

as the conventions of fugal writing of that era would allow, but concludes with a striking “new music”, symbolising the coming of Christ as Redeemer:



Both the Passacaglia and this Cantata have two common contrasting treatments in the course of the one musical structure: they both commence with an “old”, “more restricted” style of writing, and are both “freed” at a critical point (the cantata chorus where the text speaks of the coming of Christ in the New Covenant, the Passacaglia just after the third, “Advent” section, where the fugue commences). Moreover in the cantata the “freedom” of the second part is introduced by the highest voice (soprano) which conjures up a musico-pictorial image or, *Figur*, of Christ coming down from heaven to earth (not only in being the highest voice, introduced late in the chorus to give us the imagery of a Redeemer coming down from heaven, but also in the downward configuration of paired notes). In the Passacaglia the fugue is introduced by the “Advent” section which also uses the downward-moving arpeggio figures of the “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland” motive. Then follows the “release” of the (modulating) fugue.

A question must therefore be raised: did Bach also intend the Passacaglia as a venture into Covenant theology? Of course the b-minor Mass, the Passions, and the settings of “Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot” are also Covenant-related works. As we shall see later, they sometimes have a very close relationship to the Passacaglia which adds weight to this view.

But while the b-minor Mass, the Passions, and the settings of “Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot” all endorse Bach's natural preoccupation with the Covenants, not one of them could be regarded as having dealt with them in a totally dedicated or exhaustive manner. The use of strict, ostinato-founded, passacaglia forms serves well in presenting the archaic, patriarchal nature of the Old Covenant; a fugue, a relatively “modern” musical phenomenon in Bach's day, which takes the same theme but allows freedom to be developed out of the material of the earlier music, also provides an appropriate representation of the New.

Further elaboration along these lines is possible. Consider that, in essence, we have the following structure:

OLD	1) the Ten Commandments: 2) the wandering away of the people from the laws of God.	LAW
PIVOT	3) the sending of a Messiah	INCARNATION
NEW	4) the new law and re-affirmation of the old 5) final redemption and freedom from the law.	GOSPEL

In order properly to equate a musico-symbolic work with such doctrinal tenets we will need to find appropriate links to these Covenant essentials.

FORM-SYMBOLS OF THE PASSACAGLIA

Taking the 5-sectioned analysis of the work as our point of departure, and matching this with the above five elements of the Covenants, we may be struck by the five parallels involved. Most obvious will be the first, third, and fifth sections:

- 1: Ten commandments = ten ostinato statements;
- 3: the sending of a Messiah = the associated Advent references;
- 5: the notion of redemption and freedom from the law = the major tonality of and thematic “release” in the coda.

We have already dealt in detail with section three above. Let us now look at the remaining four.

SECTION ONE

This consists of exactly 10 statements of the ostinato. In any consideration of the Covenants the first part will be the giving of the Law, the 10 commandments. In a passacaglia we have a “legal” musical form: the application of a musical “law” (the basso ostinato), acts as the ultimate musical “authority” for the piece. The language of the Prelude on “Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot” in the *Orgelbüchlein* strongly supports this view with its bass-dominated, ostinato motive, reflecting the severity and immutability of scriptural canon:



- * bass-dominated ostinato forms (Orgelbüchlein)
- * canonic/imitative textures (Orgelbüchlein, Clavierübung III)
- * “10”-symbols (Clavierübung III)

Section 1 of the Passacaglia exhibits each and every one of these qualities.

SECTION TWO

In section two we find a series of treatments of the theme which are generally well-removed from the consistent basso-ostinatos of sections one and three. Here we might validly speak of “variations”. Certainly we may only rarely refer to basso-ostinato in this section.

Flanked by the solid pillars of “doctrinaire” sections one and three, section two presents us with a contrasting process of gradual thematic disintegration, until in the final segment there are only fleeting “references”. They are subjected to octave displacement, reduced units of articulation (now quavers, formerly crotchets), and the theme is increasingly hidden in the figuration.

The second aspect of the Christian concept of the Covenants concerns the turning away from the Laws of God. The Old Covenant Laws were broken. Section two may be seen as a symbol of this, since the “Law” (Theme) of the Passacaglia becomes very disintegrated and corrupted in the process described above. But we also have here a fine representation of that particular form of corruption with which laws may be broken, yet at the same time still appear to be honoured: if we look hard enough in the musical texture, especially of the final two segments, we will see how the Passacaglia theme is still present (technically), but distributed so fleetingly and so low in profile as to be no longer easily recognisable²⁹. Embroidery and subterfuge has taken over from the Law itself.



At this point section three follows with its dramatic Advent references: here, too, if our Covenant theology is to have validity, we will be dealing with the sending of a Saviour to fulfil the Law to the people of Israel:

“Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them”³⁰

SECTION FOUR (Thema Fugatum)

The double-fugue introduces entirely new freedoms: after the limited musical opportunities in the passacaglia, especially for modulation, but also for the inclusion of episodic material, and particularly after the melodic constrictions of the final three ostinato passages noted above, there is now a new radiance and vitality to the work. This continues and confirms our musical and theological symbol since the fourth stage of the Covenant tenets deal with the presence of God on earth in human form. Just as the Old Covenant was represented by the “older” musical form of a passacaglia, so too, is it now appropriate that the New is represented by a “truly modern” musical form. And what could suit Bach's Germanic modernity better at this time in history than a double fugue?

If the hypothesis that this work is a Covenant representation is to be proven, then it is precisely here that our analogies and symbols must not fail us. This is the area so often neglected by commentators on the Passacaglia - so many of them do not even consider the Fugue.

The New Covenant includes confirmation of the Old Laws, and the giving of a new Commandment, then the sacrifice of crucifixion. The Old Law is confirmed: the musical equivalent to this is the retention of the theme in a shortened form and the interweaving of a second theme. But what of the “New Commandments”? Christ's ministry included the twin affirmation of the old Law and adding of “a new commandment”.³¹ When we consider that musically we have the presentation of 12 fugal entries, 10 in minor keys, 2 in major keys, arranged thus - 5 (Minor) + 2 (Major) + 5 (Minor) - the scheme may be seen as a representation of the two new commandments in a central position, flanked by the 10 old commandments (2 major and 5 + 5 minor-key statements). The structural form of a triptych here is highly appropriate, and major keys were also still relatively “new” trends in musical tonality at this time.

Crucifixion references are also present. At the end of section four we find a Neapolitan Sixth chord of D^b-major. This has long been considered one of the most striking features of the Passacaglia. From every point of view it is a most remarkable musical moment: all progress is arrested,. In the tempering practice of its day it is also one of the most dissonant chords. It presents us with a build-up to enormous musical tension. The bars which follow and conclude the work take us by contrast very quickly into the relaxed purity of C-major³². Dissonant and dramatic chords were used with a high degree of consistency by Bach in his music around crucifixion themes and in Passion Chorales. One such example is “O Mensch beweine dein' Sünde groß” from the *Orgelbüchlein* (in the closing “Adagissimo”).



Another, related and particularly notable moment, comes from the Johannes Passion: a Neapolitan Sixth chord at exactly the point where the evangelist narrates the delivery of Jesus to be crucified - an E^b-major chord in the middle of “gekreuziget”, eventually resolving to D-major³³.



Similar, and quite consistent, harmonic tensions exist elsewhere in Bach's music on “kreuzigten” and analogous words to the extent that we should not avoid assimilating this into our palette of Bach's Passion-Crucifixion musical language. We may refer here not only to Matthäus Passion, but also to the Cantata BWV 182 “Himmelskönig sei Willkommen”. The tenor Aria “Jesu, laß durch Wohl und Weh” contains a very closely-related passage on “Kreuzigte”. Although not a totally standard Neapolitan Sixth configuration (the basso continuo seems to get caught up independently with the general expression of “Weh”), the tenor, nevertheless, executes a near copy-book Neapolitan Sixth against this:



By extension we may therefore deduce that the Neapolitan Sixth at the end of section four of the Passacaglia strongly suggests “crucifixion”³⁴. Applied specifically to the Passacaglia we see the relationship to the climax of the New Covenant: the sacrifice of the Messiah.

SECTION FIVE

What follows is therefore also going to be of relevance, for the final phase of Covenant theology is release from bondage, freedom from earthly Laws. The Kingdom of God is where the true Law of God is perfectly observed and thus earthly Law has no further relevance:

“Whereas under the old covenant men offered their own imperfect righteousness and their faulty allegiance in exchange for the promises and mercies of God, under the new covenant men without claim or merit are freely forgiven by God in Christ, who at the cost of supreme

sacrifice reconciles all men to God.”³⁵

In Bach's short, final, section of the Passacaglia we note the extraordinary tessitura through which the pedal part moves, its tonality momentarily lingering in the minor, then transiting quickly to the tonic major³⁶:



This unusual use of the two-octave pedal range generally available on organs of Bach's time is also found at the end of “Wir glauben all' an einen Gott” (Clavierübung III, Organo Pleno version). Here it has been suggested that it is a reference to that part of the creed which refers to the vanquishing of death, i.e. the extension of the Kingdom of God to encompass not only heaven and earth (one octave) but hell as well (two octaves)³⁷.



If the Passacaglia is indeed covenant- related, then it is necessary that such a reference should be made after the great “Crucifixion” chord., for what follows represents the New Covenant in the freedom of Christian Salvation. Musically this is represented in three things: release from the theme (the “Law” of our Passacaglia), the pedal (with its two-octave heaven-earth-hell symbol), and the purity, resolution and peace of the tonic major tonality.

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We have so far taken mainly into account those aspects of Bach's musical language which can be linked with symbolic imagery, *Affektenlehre*, or *Figurenlehre*. Significantly much of this has had to do with the *Orgelbüchlein* and the sharing of a symbolic *Figuren*-language common to each. The matter could rest here, the evidence accepted or not, with little corroborating proof to support it. Or it could simply be rejected as being too speculative.

But there is another line of enquiry which is independent of the *Figuren* and *Affekten* and musico-pictorial devices discussed so far. The case for a metaphorical interpretation of the Passacaglia may be independently supported or weakened if we pursue the tangential but

supportive path of numerology, that hidden discipline with which Bach was evidently very familiar.

NUMBER SYMBOLS OF THE PASSACAGLIA

In much of Bach's music, especially his religious works, certain forms of numerology are often present. This partly involves the use of gematria, in ancient practices going back to the Cabbala³⁸. There is evidence that Bach was using this system in many of his works, particularly those which had some special significance, for example religious music³⁹. Should we find evidence of an appropriate use of numerology in the Passacaglia it will give significant support to our previous deductions.

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The Covenants are implicitly doctrines of faith, of Christian belief, or creed. The word “CREDO” may be represented by numbers according to the Cabbala system as:

$$C=3 \ R=17 \ E=5 \ D=4 \ O=14$$

These numbers total 43, thus making “43” the number-equivalent of “Credo”.

If we total the 14 intervals of the passacaglia theme (C-G=5th, G-E^b=3rd, E^b-F=2nd, etc.) we also get 43:

$$C -G -E^b - F - G -A^b - F - G - D - E^b - B - C - FF - GG - CC$$

The musical intervals thus created may be summed accordingly:

$$5+3+2+2+2+3+2+4+2+4+2+5+2+5=43$$

It is a significant coincidence that the final pedal entry in “Wir glauben all' an einen Gott” mentioned above (in Clavierübung III, Organo Pleno version) also shares a “43”-symbol: it contains exactly 43 notes - appropriate to a great “Credo” statement. In both works we may read this as Bach's expression of identity with their musical and theological symbols. In the 100-bar Clavierübung prelude it occurs as a kind of final summation (along with the 100-symbol of unity) and in the Passacaglia we find it at the outset.

But there is another use of the CREDO number, 43, in the Passacaglia. Central to Christian Theology are the Covenants, and central even within this concept is the rôle of Christ in them: a Messiah, sent by God from heaven to earth, who gives two new commandments, and is sacrificed by crucifixion. The third section of this Passacaglia has already been seen as a musical symbol which represents the absolute centrality of Christ's “presence” in all of these considerations; the “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland” reference from the *Orgelbüchlein* being that central pivot which is both preceded and followed by exactly 16 thematic entries.

Appropriately it also contains a “Credo” (43) reference since it commences in bar 129.

$$129 = 43 \times 3$$

We have already noted how section 1 consists of 10 ostinato segments which, along with their musical character (“doctrinaire”, bass-oriented), suggest the 10 commandments⁴⁰.

But with section two we enter another fascinating realm of numerology. Six ostinato segments gradually break up the theme completely. We have already seen how the wandering away from the Law, the falling-into-sin analogy, is here most apt. To refer back to Piet Kee's article cited above we may also recall that a near contemporary of Bach, Andreas Werckmeister, committed to the permanency of print an important explanation of the significance of various symbolic numbers⁴¹. He said:

“The number 6 is a beastly or animalistic number and a world number ... a merely zoological, natural or simply mortal man is subject to weakness ... earlier he had stood in liaison with God and the angels ... ”

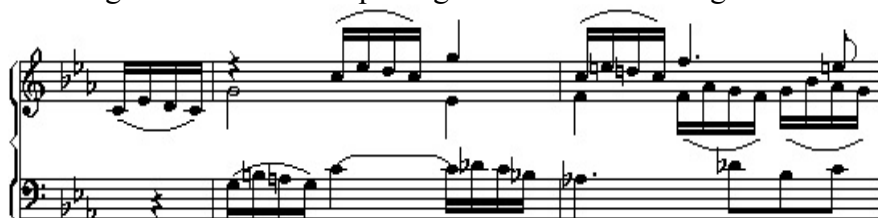
Other instances of Bach using the number 6 when dealing with Sin and Mankind's falling away from God also exist: for example the 6-voiced texture for the large, double-pedal, setting of Psalm 130 “Aus tiefer Noth” (Clavierübung III). At the conclusion of the smaller version we also find a six-voiced texture. Using 6 ostinato repetitions at this point in the Passacaglia would be most appropriate if a representation of the “wandering away” from the statutes of God was intended.

Within this group of ostinato segments one, the 14th from the beginning of the work, is of particular interest. The number 14 is closely linked with Bach's name and accordingly was often used by him in a very personal symbolic manner⁴². In the passacaglia there are 14 “pure” ostinato statements (i.e. bass manifestations of the theme which are entirely unmodified). Seven are “corrupt”, i.e. either not in the bass, or with added rests, variant rhythms, or melodic twists which single them out. The fourteenth ostinato segment is particularly interesting because it presents us with a true variant of the theme. For one thing it contains rare note-slurrings⁴³.

Then, too, this 14th segment is the only one in the entire passacaglia in which the theme appears in the alto voice. There is an intriguing parallel in the *Orgelbüchlein*: “Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ”. In that chorale-prelude the slurs (here extended to cover four notes rather than the more normal two) express the supplication of the text in upward-sweeping violinistic figures.

The image displays a musical score for the 14th ostinato segment of the Passacaglia. It consists of three staves. The top staff is in Treble clef, the middle staff is in Bass clef, and the bottom staff is in Alto clef. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The music features a complex texture with various rhythmic patterns and slurs, particularly in the bass and alto parts.

This is also a most appropriate “musical language” to be invoking in the midst of a representation (whether in *Orgelbüchlein* or Passacaglia) of “man losing his liaison with God”. Thus this 14th segment could be saying: Bach (14) is man - man is weak and can only imperfectly keep commandments - supplication is his only recourse. In fact Bach's 14th ostinato segment is one of the most “wayward” variants encountered of the theme. It is full of inexact imitations⁴⁴, wanderings and turnings (even the semiquaver groups move out, around, and back to their original notes as if “departing from” and “returning to” their “true paths”).



The third, central section contains 5 ostinato segments, starting with the Advent representation. Werckmeister identifies 5 as a “human” number, and we often find Bach using 5-part writing where fullness of time or fulfilment of prophecy is integral to the expression⁴⁵. Quite clearly this is especially appropriate around Advent where prophetic fulfilment associated with human manifestation of divinity is involved. In fact Bach’s organ settings of “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland” exhibit something of a tendency to be in five parts, at least by the end (e.g. two out of three “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland” settings in the “18” Chorales, and that of the *Orgelbüchlein*).

Apart from identifying 5 as a “human number” Werckmeister informs us that 2 is a number which symbolises the second person of the Trinity:

“The number 2 is called a Division Number, for God revealed himself through his Son ...”⁴⁶

Not only does third section of the Passacaglia consist of 5 segments, but its final 2 segments employ an essentially 5-voiced texture. When we link this with the other symbols suggested earlier, then the coupling of the final two ostinato segments of section three, and their relationship with “round world” *Figuren*, yields a series of 2 and 5 symbols most appropriate to an Advent representation: God, in human (5) form, Christ (2), come down to earth (“round world”), as was foretold in prophecy (5).

Appropriately the “2”-symbols continue on into the fugue, underlining the “presence” of Christ as essential to the New Covenant. It is the second musical form used in the work, has two themes, the first appearance of the fugue theme corresponds to the 22nd thematic appearance of the entire work.

Observing Bach's strategies with these themes we note that there are a total of 33 entries of the main theme of the work: 21 are in the passacaglia, 12 in the fugue. 33 is traditionally held to be the age of Christ at the time of the Crucifixion and seems to have been used elsewhere by Bach at appropriate moments as a number-symbol to represent this. Interestingly 21 and 12, besides being symbolic or religious numbers in their own right, are also “mirror” numbers

of each other. Subdividing the 21 segments of the passacaglia we get the following thematic groups:

Passacaglia		
10 (Commandments)	6 (breaking liaison)	5 (Advent, prophecy)

The number 33, the Christ-symbol mentioned above, is also present in the fugue in 2 ways⁴⁷: it is the sum of the intervals of the 2nd subject, and the total number of notes in the double-theme (one-note anacrusis + next four bars). We may also observe that the quadruple repetition of the 5-note phrase of the second theme gives exactly (4 times 5) 20 notes (i.e. both 2 and 5 symbols again, i.e. Christ/Advent/Prophecy numerology paralleling the musico-pictorial and *Figurenlehre* elements of the work).

The twelve fugal entries have already been discussed, (the triptych 5+2+5), but it should be noted here that this also underlines the “2” and “5” symbols which commenced with section three. This links the fugue with the final 5 passacaglia segments of section three in a manner most appropriate to a Covenant interpretation (from the “appearance” of Christ in the Advent section to the great Neapolitan Sixth chord near the end is one continuous progression of music, representing Christ's presence, or ministry on earth, and his key rôle in the Covenants). Bach, as the profound Christian that he was, would naturally have identified himself closely with the New Covenant and earthly ministry of the Messiah. Taking for a moment our 3-sectioned analysis of the entire work (rather than the 5-sectioned, i.e. grouping sections 1 & 2, 3 & 4, and 5) we can see this central section (3 & 4 together) forming one continuous whole in the performance of the work.

LAW	DIS-OBEDIENCE	INCARNATION & GOSPEL		
Section 1	Section 2	Section 3	Section 4	Section 5
Laws	Wandering away	158 bars continuous music “Advent to Crucifixion”		Coda. Freedom from the law

The symbol here is evident: Christ's earthly ministry, from Advent to Crucifixion, was Bach's major theological concern as a Christian, that part of theology with which Bach would most closely identify in his personal rôle as a (musical) minister. The conjunction of these two relevant sections of the Passacaglia, the Advent to Crucifixion representations, make for a single, unified, continuous, larger segment, self-contained in 158 bars of music. 158 is another special number associated with Bach:

J O H A N N
9 14 8 1 13 13

S E B A S T I A N
18 5 2 1 18 19 9 1 13

B A C H
2 1 3 8

Summing these numbers:

$$9+14+8+1+13+13+18+5+2+1+18+19+9+1+13+2+1+3+8 = 158$$

The conclusion of section 4 is clearly marked by the Neapolitan Sixth chord, Bach's musical symbol of death by crucifixion. It is the seal to the Covenants. Precisely here our number-symbols must not fail us, for this is the moment of mightiest theological gravity. It is also the most striking feature of the Passacaglia. Whether we count from the beginning of the “thema fugatum” or the commencement of the entire work, the bar-number in which this chord stands is a multiple of the “death number” 13. Counting from the beginning of the entire work we encounter it at bar 286. This is the product of three prime numbers:

$$2 \times 11 \times 13 = 286$$

From the start of the fugue, however, it is 117 bars to the Neapolitan Sixth, which also breaks down again into prime numbers:

$$3 \times 3 \times 13 = 117$$

In this latter equation the Trinity symbolism is both evident and appropriate (the 3 x 3, or triple use of the number 3 - $\underline{3} \times \underline{3} \times 1\underline{3}$, or the addition of digits in the final total - $1+1+7 = 9 = 3 \times 3$), since the concept of the Trinity is first identified with the New Covenant and it is from this “New Covenant” section that we count the 117 bars.

We may read the 3 x 3 x 13 as 3 and 3 and 13, i.e. 33 (Christ) 13 (killed, crucified), as another reference to the earthly existence of Christ and the seal on the Covenants.

But the 2 x 11 x 13 also has significance.

“2”, as we have seen from Werckmeister, is the symbol for the human manifestation of God, Christ;

“11” is the first number after 10 and thus can be seen to represent the “overstepping” or exceeding of the 10 commandments⁴⁸.

This allows us to view the Neapolitan Sixth chord as having very special significance: the most grievous breach of the Commandments (10+1=11) was the killing (13) of God incarnate (2).

Whichever way we care to view this chord, either musically or with reference to numerology, it will strongly suggest to us the seal of the New Covenant, the crucifixion of Christ.

The fifth and final section of the work is short, a brief coda, free from the constrictions of musical themes, consistent, in a way, with what we know in this life of the life to come. The part-writing builds up in the final two bars until the concluding chord contains 7 notes. 7 is a prime number having special associations with forgiveness (e.g. the 70 x 7 of the Gospels)⁴⁹. However the most relevant references to the meaning of 7 are those which identify it with “completion”, God's resting on the 7th day of creation:

“...(the number 7) is...perfect“ says Augustine, ”...therefore it is often used to represent something comprehensive“. It is a symbol for ”the Peace of God, the Peace man finds in God...the comprehensiveness of finality...“⁵⁰

Or, to quote Werckmeister:

”The number 7 is a Rest Number ... a Holy number because none other than the Spirit of God can fathom it. Hence the Spirit of God is called “sevenfold” ...“⁵¹

Not only does the brevity of section 5 endorse the notion that “none other than the Spirit of God” can fathom the “comprehensiveness of finality” (the brevity representing the fact that Man can contribute little to any understanding of it), but the final C-major chord with its 7 notes expresses total purity and restfulness. This is particularly so in the organ tuning and tempering practices of Bach's day. Moreover, even the distribution of notes maximises the peaceful effect of the chord: the slightly-beating (tempered) fifth, c-g, is relegated to the tenor range, where, being low, the beats will be fewer per second and therefore much less perceptible:



A remarkably similar distribution of parts with the same “peaceful” results from the effects of tempering will be found at the conclusion of “Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen/Vor deinen Thron” (18 Chorales):



These two examples of almost identically-disposed final chords suggest yet another instance of a common “musical language” being used. The chorale setting also deals with ultimate peace. Their musical qualities are achieved as a result of tempering practices of the era, the maximising of their purity through part-distribution, the numerology of “rest” and “peace” suggested by the 7-parts, and the release from a long period of predominately minor tonality to the relaxation of the major, are all appropriate to the notion of freedom, joy, reconciliation and peace which is the promise of the New Covenant⁵². They both represent Christian visions of heavenly bliss.

The entire work is contained within 293 bars. 293 is a prime number. This might be seen as a sign of the unity and indivisibility of the Covenants. But in examining another Covenant-related work of Bach's, the Mass in b minor⁵³, we may observe how it has a grand total of 2,493 bars⁵⁴. It has been suggested that, by returning these numbers to letters, Cabbala style, we get:

2	4	9	3
B	D	J	C
Beatus	Dominus	Jesus	Christus

The “Dominus” may be dispensed with and the meaning remains essentially the same, leaving the relevant number-equivalents as 2 (B), 9 (J), and 3 (C). Thus we may observe a further common relationship between the Passacaglia and the b minor Mass: they share their Christ-symbols through their related bar-counts and significance:

$$2 (4) 9 3$$

Coincidentally, when we sum the digits in the 293 bars of the Passacaglia we get a total of 14, a fact which can hardly have passed unnoticed by the composer:

$$293$$

$$2 + 9 + 3 = 14 = B + A + C + H$$

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REGISTRATION AND INTERPRETATION

With so many aspects of this great musical monolith suggesting the Old and New Covenants we are drawn back to the questions which have been posed about it over the past century or two⁵⁵. If the Covenant theory is acceptable then we may hazard a few conclusions:

a) the Radulescu analysis of the actual passacaglia, in which it was suggested that the work is structured as a kind of combined musical and mathematical proportion of the Cross, could well be correct, in which case this is yet another relevant symbol which Bach has built into a unique work, although it does not deal with the fugue;

b) the Piet Kee analysis would tend to look a little suspect in the light of a Covenant interpretation - in fact Kee may have missed the point of the Werckmeister links with religious symbolism and instead taken the path of musical physics, an area in which Bach showed little interest. Such a physical, bland-numbers approach reminds us of the comment by Bach's second son, that his father "war kein Liebhaber von trockenem mathematischen Zeuge..." (no lover of dry mathematical things...);

c) theories that the work is based on a Fibonacci⁵⁶ series is not too far removed from "dry mathematical things" either, although it can be demonstrated that Bach knew and used Fibonacci series (or its related phenomenon, the *Golden Section*) elsewhere on occasions and so presumably found this "interesting" enough⁵⁷. There does seem to be an embryonic series developing at the outset but that glove rapidly becomes a misfit (nor does it really fit for Kee's theories of harmonic series intervals). Furthermore the fugue must be excluded or it will present impossible complications in the quest for one or other of these series. If we must look for Fibonacci series then more logical approach might be the various ways of viewing the form of the work suggested in the analysis above, i.e. dividing it into 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, etc., formal divisions.

d) the Covenant interpretation of the work would certainly support its being regarded as an organ work rather than a harpsichord piece, since the organ is the more appropriate of the two instruments in Bach's culture for conveying "theological" music⁵⁸;

e) no break (i.e. halting, repeating the anacrusis *c* of the "thema fugatum" as if it was a "prelude and separate fugue") should take place between passacaglia and fugue since this would disturb the total bar-number structure of the piece and the Neapolitan Sixth chord. It would also divide the continuity of the 158 bars of sections three and four, which has been seen here as the symbol of Christ's coming and ministry on earth. These two linked sections will have to be totally continuous if such a symbol is to be projected. The evidence of the existing manuscript copies appears to be strongly against breaking, and in favour of connecting, at this point;

f) injecting a cadenza (in what style?) after the Neapolitan Sixth likewise destroys some of the Rhetoric and Covenant symbolism. It further distracts from the shock of the great "death and crucifixion" moment, may add bar numbers and disturb the numerology symbols in the same way as suggested in "e)" above. Taking tempering into consideration a cadenza may also move us too quickly into, or too quickly away from, the resolution and relaxation of section 5

which seems ideally suited to its purposes as it stands⁵⁹. If the organist also includes more statements of the theme, then a similar erosion of Bach's carefully constructed entries (21 + 12) will take place and the set proportions of the piece will be rapidly destroyed.

The only remaining question is one of registration. Here we tread on flexible ground since, traditionally, organ registration is an interplay between the nature of the music, the composer's wishes (if known), the instrument available, and the organist's individual interpretation.

But if we are correct in our interpretation of the Covenant analogy expressed in this work, then a fairly substantial scheme, carefully thought out, is called for: presumably something of an appropriately monolithic organo pleno. On Bach's organs this would tend to have allowed both the contrapuntal and chordal/homophonic parts of the piece to sound well. The pedal would most likely have been registered with a reed. This would give appropriate gravity and direct impact to the “Law” of the piece, the ostinato. It should also contrast well with the (reedless?) manual pleno when it is heard without the pedal being present - and the piece does seem to have been structured with such a variety in mind.

Passacaglia

Bars 1-41	Consistent Pedal (Thematic)	⌋
Bars 41-49	Varied Pedal (Thematic)	
Bars 49-73	Consistent Pedal (Thematic)	⌋
Bars 73-89	Varied Pedal (Thematic)	
Bars 89-97	Pedal Absent	
Bars 97-105	Varied Pedal (Non-thematic)	
Bars 105-129	Pedal Absent	
Bars 129-145	Consistent Pedal (Thematic)	⌋
Bars 145-153	Varied Pedal (Thematic)	
Bars 153-169	Consistent Pedal (Thematic)	⌋

Fugue

Bars 170-181	Pedal Absent
Bars 181-198	Pedal Present
Bars 198-221	Pedal Absent
Bars 221-293	Pedal Present

A contrasting pedal registration (with reed) would tend to bring out the second section appropriately: the gradual wandering away from the Law, losing of liaison with God, this being associated here with a decreasing presence of the pedal. Such presence and absence of a “reedy” pedal will be rendered particularly effective by the sounds produced, thinking of either Schnitger's North German reeds or those of Saxony's Gottfried Silbermann.

Such a pleno treatment is strongly endorsed by one extant copy of the work which includes the “Organo Pleno” instruction⁶⁰.

Section two, however, hints at the possibility of - even demands - moving to another manual⁶¹. This would seem to be an appropriate registration practice if we are to underscore a notion of law and/or liaison breaking. The “Pleno” instruction need not be infringed with such an approach since alternation of Hauptwerk and Positiv plenos is endemic to the Bach

organ - in fact we may even move to an Oberwerk or Brustwerk for the final segment where the more delicate articulation and single-line texture will be reflected in a secondary or tertiary pleno. In addition to this the dramatic impact of returning to the full Pleno for ostinato segment 17, the “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland” Advent reference (and return of the “Law” also manifested symbolically in the return of a full pedal registration), will be most dramatically and effectively presented (as is appropriate to the theology)⁶².

Bearing all of this in mind one possible scheme for section two is:

Segment 11: Right Hand continuing on Hauptwerk, Left Hand chords on Positiv⁶³, pedal continues;

Segment 12: Both hands Hauptwerk;

Segment 13: as for 12, but with pedals (unchanged registration from section 1)⁶⁴;

Segment 14: entirely on the Positiv (the more sensitive action here may help to bring out the articulations implicit or marked, and also the Left Hand trills);

Segment 15: “dialogue” between Hauptwerk (R.H. upbeat and mainbeat figures) and Positiv (Left Hand, and Right hand helps during second beats);

Segment 16: entirely on the Brustwerk (or Positiv).

Sections 3, 4 and 5 may be played continuously on a pleno, since manual or stop-changing is unnecessary. It is extremely difficult to contrive any stop-changing convincingly here. Such an approach links in well symbolically, since through a moratorium on stop-changes at this point, all the *New Covenant* elements are bonded in a consistent and unified registration block.

Change, even if it is the one point where it is easily possible, seems undesirable after the Neapolitan Sixth chord. If we add stops for the final section we are, in fact, distracting from this chord and its theological significance: the seal on the Covenants. By adding stops for the coda we are also increasing tension for section 5, yet this could be working against Bach's own apparent objectives in relaxing the music into the peacefulness of C-major. The representation of the “finality” of our 7-symbols will also not be helped if we increase registration tension here. All of which, along with the “Organo Pleno” indication mentioned earlier, argues for an unchanging plenum from segment 17 onwards. The work actually needs to be “helped” to relax here (no more themes to be dealt with, C-major tonality after D \flat -major climax): adding stops could actually work against this.

CONCLUSION

Symbolic interpretations of Bach's music are usually difficult to “prove” since there is very little direct evidence for them coming from Bach's own hand⁶⁵. Yet in the organ works, the Cantatas and Passions, and sometimes in seemingly purely “secular” works, we consistently encounter *Figuren*, *Affekten*, and number-symbols to an extent which makes it impossible to

ignore them. Then, too, we have the direct evidence of Werckmeister and others, persons who dwelt in the same culture or otherwise had clear influences on Bach.

Symbolism has given us great art, amongst the greatest of all art. This is well evidenced by the work of a Fra Angelico, a Bosch, a Mallarmé, a John of the Apocalypse, or a Salman Rushdie. Understanding the symbolism involved is essential to the full comprehension of art works in which it is used. So, too, with Bach's music, will the effort of understanding the language invoked repay us many times over.

Certainly we may say this: if the Passacaglia has a symbolic meaning - and except for numerological elements this meaning can hardly be "hidden" far below the surface since writers 200 years later discern such qualities as "doctrinaire" in it - then our Covenant portrayal fits from every point of view. Its *Affekten*, *Figuren* and Numerology all work together to suggest that we are dealing here, not just with an "abstract" piece of music, (a term more apt for that music which "paints pictures" rather than speaks to us), but with a unique piece of Christian symbolism which can stand alongside the most important creations of the great symbolists in other art forms as well as music.

In the case of this Passacaglia it helps us to answer questions relating to its performance. But it also helps to achieve a restoration, or entrenchment of this piece, in its rightful place as one of the great monuments of 18th Century religious art, a unique masterwork, a synthesis of Christian music and theology with its own distinctive eschatological message to convey.

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Endnotes

1. "Passacaglia" (upper case) is used in this article to refer to the work as a whole; "passacaglia" (lower case) refers either to the first 168 bars of BWV 582, or to the broader, generic musical form.
2. The Organ Yearbook 1980 pp.95ff (Frits Knuf).
3. The Diapason, June, July, August, September 1983 (Scranton Gillette)
4. The Organ Music of J.S.Bach (Cambridge 1984)
5. most recently Bach and the Riddle of the Number Alphabet Ruth Tatlow (Cambridge University Press)
6. The Organ Music of Bach Peter Williams p.264 (Cambridge, 1986)
7. if we really insist on pursuing the notion that this work is in variation form, then we should regard the fugue as its most significant "variation".
8. The age of Buxtehude gave us some ostinatos as part of broader Toccata structures (or their derivatives). But it was the environment of Reger which was eventually destined to become a far more fertile breeding ground for paired passacaglias and fugues. Even so, Buxtehude had a recognisable tendency to put the ground-bass sections of his organ works towards the end of a piece rather than the very beginning.
9. The bar numbers in this work are to be counted from the first note (bar 1) to the final chord (bar 293). Although he could easily have done so, Bach did not obey the convention of shortening the final bar by the value of the initial anacrusis. In this way we then need to count the opening anacrusis as a bar (one).
10. It may be worth noting here that this means of analysis, with the 1 or 2 or 3 or 5 (but not 4) subdivisions, comes far closer to producing a Fibonacci series (1+2=3, 2+3=5 etc.) than any other extracted structure does. In fact we may go further along this path: an 8-sectioned division (3+5=8) is also possible (and endorses Radulescu's analysis of 1979 if we combine his 3rd and 4th then 5th and 6th subdivisions and form 2 blocks of these - which would seem reasonable enough under "macro-analysis" conditions):

	Passacaglia				Fugue			
Section	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
No. of ostinato entries	3	7	6	5	5	2	5	Coda 0

and 13 sections (5+8=13). This might endorse Klotz's analysis of 1972 if we separate his first group of 3 into 1+2):

	Passacaglia									Fugue			
Section	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
No. of ostinato entries	1	2	3	3	1	3	3	3	2	5	2	5	Coda 0

But at this point - or before - it becomes far too easy to find tiny subsections.

11. some commentators claim to find veiled reference to the theme in this section. Whilst it is true that the relevant notes may be found somewhere or other in the bars which follow the Neapolitan Sixth, the notion that Bach intended this must be seriously questioned since the notes “found” here neither occur in any consistent or recognisable pattern, part, octave, or rhythm, nor are they presented in their proper order (some occur together with others). We have an utterly different situation than at the end of section two (which seems to be about as far as Bach could go in this piece when in “thematic fragmentation” mode). Is the second fugal subject also hidden here? Could Beethoven's Fifth symphony also (and arguably more clearly) be based on the Bach/Raison theme?

12. In “Musik als Klangrede” (Residenz Verlag, Salzburg 1982)

13. Paul Henry Lang George Frideric Handel (Faber & Faber) especially pp.624ff.

14. Various authors seem to approach this subject in quite different ways. They include Albert Schweitzer, Stainton de B. Taylor, and Pierre Vidal amongst many others. Some unfortunately, like Vidal, seem to be drawing rather amazing conclusions which lack credibility and properly supported proofs. Often, though, as with Kee quoting Werckmeister, they actually provide us with important additional information. Vidal in Bach: Les Psaumes, Passions, Images, et Structures dans l'œuvre d'orgue, (Stil Editions), mentions and reproduces annotations which Bach wrote into the Calov Bible and Commentary of 1681-1682 which came into his possession in 1733. Some details are often of some support and relevance to this subject. But possibly the most important modern author who has researched and linked the texts, their music, symbolism and numerology, is to be found in Friedrich Smend's discussions of the Cantatas and Passions: J.S.Bach Kirchen Kantaten (Christliche Zeitschriftenverlag, Berlin 1966). Smend's unique published works in this area appear to remain untranslated into English, with the exception of fragments which have been picked up by commentators in *Das Alte Werk* and other recording series of the Passions and Cantatas.

15. but see Williams, Op.Cit. Vol. III, pp.72, 76 etc. for a second - if not always consistently applied - opinion about the inclusion and interpretation of symbolic elements.

16. Eighteenth century composers are not alone in adopting and using a musical language: more recently composers such as Percy Grainger and Olivier Messiaen have developed special musical languages.

17. as accurately as we can judge on mainly internal evidence, since we lack the original manuscript of the latter.

18. Marie-Claire Alain has already pointed out the close connections which occur between *Orgelbüchlein* and *Passacaglia* although these comments are generally made *en passant* in jacket notes to recordings or masterclasses and therefore sometimes tend to miss their mark in academic publication arenas.

19. he also employs this device at seemingly meaningful moments in other works. For example we find it in the a-minor Prelude and Fugue (at bar 29 of the Prelude), the C-major Prelude and Fugue in 9/8 time (to introduce the augmented fugue theme in the pedal part as it finally makes its notable appearance in the fugue), and we might also point to other manifestations of it, for example in the b-minor prelude and fugue (bars 38/39 etc.).

20. for example from the *Orgelbüchlein* the pedal part in the chorale prelude "*Herr Gott nun schleuss den Himmel auf*".

21. the 16 following are constituted from the remaining 4 ostinatos of the passacaglia plus the 12 entries of the fugue (4+12=16).

22. just as crossed arms might mean, in terms of "body language", that somebody is adopting a defensive position or that they are simply cold. However crossed legs as well as crossed arms, and the clutching of a large suitcase in the lap, might confirm a "defence" stance. Similar dual or multiple indicators will also be needed where musical symbolism is concerned.

23. Genesis 28, 12.

24. apart from textual associations with angels (along with shepherds, babies, wise men, and other *folk* archetypes appropriate to the season) examples of *Figur* are occasionally to be found in Noëls. In P. Dandrieu's *Michau qui causoit ce grand bruit* the repeated chords of the left hand (low down, on a "Grand Jeu" registration - with tremulant?) clearly suggest the beating of the angel's wings.

25. "Round world" concepts are also very much part of the Advent environment. Although Bach was probably unaware of Purcell's Anthem. He would not only have understood this musical *Figur* in such a context, but been perfectly capable of using it himself - it was not the exclusive property of Purcell but simply a common musical language. It may be no coincidence that the chorale "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland" contains text which, in its first verse, conjures up exactly this same imagery:

"dass sich wundert alle Welt/ Gott solch Geburt ihm bestellt"

"the whole world is in wonder/ that God gave him such a birth"

26. it is noteworthy that the earliest dating given by some authorities for both Cantata and Passacaglia are the same: 1707. Whilst now considered unlikely, the two works do appear, nonetheless, to be from the same general era and there are other relationships, e.g. keys. The dating of the *Orgelbüchlein* commencement is usually thought to be around the same period.

27. it is remarkable how accurately people can pick this up: Peter Williams (whose reservations on the validity of circumstantial evidence in symbolic musical matters have already been alluded to) refers to the *doctrinaire* qualities of the Passacaglia (The Organ Music of Bach Vol.I p.259). In Volume II he also makes reference to similar qualities in the *Orgelbüchlein* "Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot". Certainly if this music is *talking to us*, then it is saying it in a very consistent, doctrinaire or authoritarian voice! In other words the musical language is communicating itself - even to those who express doubts in aspects of Figuren, Affekten and symbolism.

28. although not in strict canon, we should draw attention to the repeated imitations in the *Orgelbüchlein* "Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot": a manifestation of the very same thing in another, highly relevant, work.

29. it is tempting to compare this with Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat (Alice in Wonderland) where the smile persisted long after the disappearance of the cat behind it - which is not too far from the usual manner in which the human race generally gets around Laws they don't like.

30. Matthew 5:17

31. see Matthew 22:36-40 (the affirmation of the old), and John 13:34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another..."

32. assuming Bach's tempering practice at this time (early 18th-century) was somewhere in the general ambit of Werckmeister, a D^b-major chord would have been one of the most dissonant, and a C-major chord one of the most consonant available to him.

33. Johannes Passion Recitative No. 47

34. We should also note, in passing, the remarkable Neapolitan Sixth harmonies in the Prelude and Fugue in c minor (BWV 546). The Prelude has often enough (Spitta, Williams etc.) also been designated as "powerful", "overwhelming" or "gigantic". We note, too, the "Golden Section" in the proportion of its two themes (55+89=144) and certain similarities with the "double chorus" effect of the Matthäus Passion opening. All of this leads again to the question of whether Bach was trying to symbolise something in this work: Passion perhaps? Was it associated somehow with the Matthäus Passion? Did they originate around the same date and place? If so, then the presence of Neapolitan Sixth harmonies may, once again, be significant.

35. James Atkinson in "A Dictionary of Christian Theology" Ed. Alan Richardson (SCM Press 1969) page 77.

36. noting also that the pedal part not only ranges through these two octaves but consists of 33 notes contained within 6 bars. See the comments on numerology which follow.

37. the interval of an octave has always been an object of fascination from the ancient Greeks to the present day. For centuries now we have connected it with the heavens (the *Sphaera Octava*, or Octave of the Spheres). See also Piet Kee, Op. cit. in "The Diapason", and Ludwig

Prautzsch "Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit" (Hänsler Verlag, Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1980) page 11.

38. taking $A=1, B=2, \dots, I/J=9, \dots, U/V=20, \dots, Z=24$, we may replace the letters of a word with numbers and manipulate them mathematically. $B=2, A=1, C=3, H=8$, thus: $B+A+C+H=14$, $B \times A \times C \times H=48$ etc.

39. see, for example, Friedrich Smend's J.S.Bach bei seinem Namen gerufen (Bärenreiter) for a fascinating account of, and solution to the puzzle canons represented in the portrait of the Thomaskantor painted by E. G. Haussmann for Bach's entry into the Mitzler Society in 1747.

40. and are subdivided into two groups: 3 at the outset are homophonic, the following 7 imitative/contrapuntal. We can only note that 3 of the 10 commandments are positive ("Thou shalt ..."), and 7 are negative ("Thou shalt not ..."). Apart from this, 3 and 7 are significant mystical numbers. But one would have to agree with Williams in this instance and say that such interpretations have little really convincingly demonstrable validity. Other interpretations (or none) are equally possible.

41. and, coincidentally, along with other writings from this time, he gives us a clear indication that his contemporaries, one of whom was Bach, did think in terms of numerical and musical symbols in the manner we are suggesting in this study. In fact Werckmeister is one of many who witness that numerology was an important pre-occupation of the time. The current debate about the validity of numerological interpretations is healthy and timely, but it should never overlook such facts as these.

42. see, in particular, Smend and Prautzsch works cited elsewhere for many further examples.

43. We are dealing here with groups of four notes slurred under the one "bow". We may observe how Bach frequently used slurrings to symbolise something special in the meaning of the music or its expression. The most typical instances are probably his frequent use of note-pairs to represent the "human" condition, especially when allusions to the Passion are being made, or other moments when human frailty is involved. There are reasonable grounds (because of the rarity and sighing-respiration nature of all short slurred note-groups) to make this association once again here. We further note that such a device is part of the Covenant and/or Commandment musical language since "Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot" (Clavierübung III, c.f. in canon in tenor) uses them in a manner which clearly suggests just such a context. Also the *Orgelbüchlein* "O Mensch bewein' dein' Sünde Groß" provides us with further examples of this use of slurrings. Significantly we also find it in the Matthäus Passion chorus based on the very same Chorale. The only other point where Bach has apparently used slurrings in the Passacaglia is in the second theme of the "Thema Fugatum", which, consistent with our "covenant" interpretation, is another point involving "humanity", i.e. the presence of God on earth in human form (section 4).

44. a similar device is used at the end of "Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot" from Clavierübung III (c.f. in tenore version), where *imperfect musical imitation* (inexact canon) appears to be being used to symbolise man's *imperfect ability to follow commandments*.

45. for instance in the *Orgelbüchlein's* Easter chorale “Heut' triumphiret Gottes Sohn” the falling/gathering arpeggios of “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland” are recalled in a 5-part texture at the very end of this prelude. This is especially appropriate here since there are links back to Advent in the prophecy of resurrection involved in this, links which are clearly important since they occur so frequently between the Advent and Passion/Easter sections of *Orgelbüchlein*.

46. Piet Kee quoting Werckmeister, Op. cit. August 1983, p.11

47. is the “double presence of God” involved here also a “human” reference? A whole host of “2”-symbols appears at this point.

48. see Prautzsch, Op. cit. p.12 etc., for further details about the meaning of numbers which “exceed” a symbolic number.

49. it is also interesting to note that there is a kind of mirroring of 7-symbols at beginning and end of the Passacaglia (an Alpha and Omega?) since there are 7 crotchets in the theme as well as 7 notes in the final chord. In fact for logical rhythmic consistency Bach might have repeated the final “g” of the ostinato theme, but that would have given 8 crotchets. The relationship between this and the prelude “Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, heiliger Geist” from the *Orgelbüchlein* is again fringing on musical language: the seven off-beat quavers of the prelude and seven off-beat crotchets of the Passacaglia, the bass-orientation of a prelude dealing with Holy Spirit theology and the musical and theological links between this and similarly relevant Covenant symbols are, at the very least, a most appropriate coincidence.

50. Prautzsch Op. cit. p.11

51. Piet Kee Op. cit. August 1983 p.11

52. note particularly the extended passage in the tonic major (several bars of it before the end, virtually the whole of section five): here we have no sudden, last-minute, tierce de picardy.

53. any Mass must to a degree, of course, be a Covenant-related work (c.f. I Corinthians 11, 23-25; Mark 14, 22ff etc.)

54. this bar-count is one of those derived, taking a number of factors into consideration, by Kees van Houten and Marinus Kasbergen in “Bach en het Getal” (De Walburg Pers, Zutphen 1985), p.120.

55. and how curious it is that this work, in particular, is so frequently referred to as “monolithic” - great tablets of stone being not inappropriate to our reading of it. Is this another example, like “doctrinaire”, of musical language actually communicating, subconsciously, down through the ages?

56. this is a mathematical sequence where the next number is based on the sum of the previous two:

1 2 3 5 8 13 21 34 55 89 144 ... and further.

57. this theory was highly prevalent on a verbal basis around the mid-1960's in Vienna when I was a student there. But, so far as I know, it appears never to have been seriously proposed in print.

58. this question has, in any case, long since been at least tacitly resolved in favour of the organ on the basis of "internal" evidence in the music itself. The fact that, for these reasons, it is now universally considered as organ music, should, in its turn, strengthen the likelihood of its having a theological message to convey.

59. in any event cadenzas of the kind usually essayed here should traditionally follow tonic chords in second inversion, not chords of the flattened supertonic in first inversion. In concept, style and content cadenzas of this kind belong to another musical era altogether (at least a generation, or more, after J. S. Bach).

60. Williams, *Organ Music of Bach*, Op.cit. Vol.I p.253

61. there is sufficient discomfort in attempting to play all of section two on one manual to lead most organists into manual changing in this section, although staying on the one manual is only uncomfortable and sometimes marginally compromising, not utterly impossible.

62. it might be worth observing in passing that the slow acceptance of Opera in northern Europe, especially within the church (well evident in the terms of Bach's contract for his appointment to Leipzig in 1723), may have been partially responsible for the high energy levels poured into the remarkable organ music of the North German school, the evolvment of *Stylus Phantasticus*, and the often exceptionally dramatic nature of this music. Just as, when one sense is removed, for example sight, then the other senses of the human organism become correspondingly sharper, so, too, the tendency to suppress secular dramatic entertainment like Opera might be seen to have had the effect of forcing other musical activity to become the outlet for a much-needed dramatic expression. The Passacaglia has some affinities with this dramatic style of organ music. At any rate it would have been surprising had the organ, a most highly-esteemed, visually dramatic, and *perfected* piece of musical technology of the seventeenth century, not become the vehicle for remarkable musical, genres which may have been acting, albeit subconsciously, as opera-substitutes in North Germany until well into the 18th-century.

63. the suggested scheme is easiest to perform on the generally typical North German baroque organ keyboard configurations where the Rückpositiv is placed under the Hauptwerk, the Brustwerk above the Hauptwerk. This is consistent with the Schnitger style of organ to which Bach was so strongly attracted in this early period of his life. The Saxon organ type with which he was later associated tended to be a little different, and such a manual-change scheme is sometimes more difficult to negotiate on these organs. The passacaglia works tonally quite well on both instrumental types.

64. If the same pleno is used at the start as at the end there should be no need to alter the pedal registration at all in the course of the piece. Alternatively there is plenty of time to add both pedal and manual stops before section three if a bigger pleno is used, but this virtually assumes use of secondary divisions during section two.

65. although there are some clear enough hard facts: for example the numbers he has underlined and crossed out in the manuscript of the *Achtzehn Choräle*.