

Variations on a Tradition: The Chorale “Partitas” of Johann Sebastian Bach

By

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ABSTRACT

The chorale variation sets by Johann Sebastian Bach represent the culmination of a long tradition, which is itself a merger of two older traditions—the organ chorale, specifically the ornamented chorale, and the secular variation set. Combining north German musical precedent with his knowledge of French music, Bach wrote four variation sets that encapsulate this unique point in music history: *Christ, der du bist der helle Tag* (BWV 766), *O Gott, du frommer Gott* (BWV 767), *Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig* (BWV 768), and *Ach, was soll ich Sünder machen* (BWV 770). He also wrote canonic variations on *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm' ich her* (BWV 769/BWV 769a), which will be briefly discussed but not considered in depth because their organization and purpose are so different from the other sets.

Taking its cue from other areas of Bach organ scholarship, this document revolves around a discussion of what ties the variations together—using the language of texture, melody, harmony, and form—and what is distinctive about each variation. The majority of the movements, of the ornamented-soprano-chorale variety, can be described using just four motivic principles; the rest can be similarly grouped based on other musical parameters, like the perpetual-motion chorales and the *bicinia*. In doing so, this project contributes to the wider field of Bach studies by shedding light on an otherwise neglected area of the composer's output.

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INTRODUCTION

Johann Sebastian Bach decidedly enriched the tradition of the German organ chorale in several ways; from the congregational chorales he wrote as a young musician in Arnstadt to the expansive, mature settings in *Clavier-Übung III*, the chorale is a thread that weaves through much of the composer's output. Although one type of organ chorale, the chorale variation set, was already a venerable form by Bach's time, the existing literature gives most of Bach's chorale variations sparse treatment.

In the absence of a dedicated study of the variation sets, two sources provide information that forms the basis for this project. *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach* by Peter Williams provides a list of Bach's works with some information, such as sources and overall structure, for each piece.¹ *J. S. Bach as Organist*, edited by George Stauffer and Ernest May, is a collection of essays that discuss specific aspects of the composer's life and works. Neither, however, provides a comprehensive survey of the chorale variation sets, nor does either book attempt to compare the sets to one another in search of commonality. Such treatment has been reserved for other genres of Bach organ works. In particular, Stauffer's "The Stylistic Development of the Preludes," published in a separate volume, *The Organ Preludes of J. S. Bach*, will serve as a model for this undertaking: Stauffer categorizes the free works of Bach according to form and finds that six "organizational schemes" encompass the works under discussion.²

The chorale variation set will be defined here as a multi-movement work in which a single chorale is treated a number of different ways, with the following two restrictions: each statement of the tune is treated in only one way (that is, no phrase-by-phrase variations, as in a

¹ Peter Williams, *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

² George Stauffer, *The Organ Preludes of J. S. Bach* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1980), 32. These "organizational schemes" are form distinctions, as follows: 1. Through-composed, continuous; 2. Through-composed, sectional; 3. Ostinato-variation; 4. Hybrid concerto; 5. Concerto; and 6. A B A B. It should be noted that three pieces do not adhere to any of these schemes and are listed later as "miscellaneous forms."

chorale fantasia), and verse associations are not always obvious. According to this definition, there are five pieces to consider: *Christ, der du bist der helle Tag* (BWV 766), *O Gott, du frommer Gott* (BWV 767), *Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig* (BWV 768), *Canonic Variations on Vom Himmel hoch, da komm' ich her* (BWV 769/BWV 769a), and *Ach, was soll ich Sünder machen* (BWV 770). The Canonic Variations will not be discussed in great detail here for two reasons: first, they have already benefited from extensive analysis in the literature, and, second, they are quite different from the other pieces. Not only does the idea of canonic treatment already tie the variations together, but they were also composed for a specific purpose, the entrance of Bach into the Leipzig “Society for the Musical Sciences.”³

The goal of this document will be first to consider the chorale variations individually in terms of the harmony, melody, texture, and form of each movement; then, the movements will be categorized and compared to provide a comprehensive overview of this subset of Bach’s organ works.

³ Williams, *Organ Music*, 513.

I. BACKGROUND: MERGING TWO TRADITIONS

The Organ Chorale

The Protestant Reformation ushered in a new era of congregational singing. Using both newly composed melodies and melodies based on existing chants and secular tunes, reformers like Martin Luther created a new genre of German-language hymn called the chorale. In Germany, instrumental settings of chorales served as introductions and interludes to hymn singing.

One early example of the four-part chorale, *Wir glauben all' an einen Gott*, is found in a Breslau Library tablature, which dates from the middle of the sixteenth century and has been missing since World War II. A later source, *Orgel oder Instrument Tabulatur* (1571/1583) by Elias Nikolaus Ammerbach, contains more significant evidence of the German chorale with twenty settings of Lutheran tunes, homophonic settings in which the melody appears either in the soprano or in the tenor. Another tablature, *Tabulaturbuch auff dem Instrumente* (1598) by Augustus Nörminger, contains seventy-seven chorale settings arranged as a complete cycle for the liturgical year.⁴

Although the earliest organ chorales were harmonizations of ornamented melodies, later composers subjected the chorale tunes to contrapuntal treatment. The second setting of *Ach Gott vom Himmel* in the Celle Tablature (1601) is an example of a chorale motet, in which each line of the chorale is treated separately—in this case, fugally. Johann Stephan's pieces in this collection show “free use of the most varied means, such as ornamentation, fragmentation, and echo effects.”⁵ Michael Praetorius (1571-1621) wrote three pieces that expanded this form into the grand chorale motet, such as *Wir glauben all' an einen Gott*, which uses imitation,

⁴ Willi Apel, *The History of Keyboard Music to 1700* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1972), 98-100.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 348.

augmentation, and diminution, in addition to “the figurations, clavieristic figures, and motifs of the Baroque,” to form two hundred sixty-five measures of substantial music.⁶

The Variation Set

The keyboard variation set emerged in the middle of the sixteenth century in several different countries; in Spain, composers wrote *diferencias* on secular themes, especially *Guardame las vacas*. The *Libro de cifra nueva* (1557) of Venegas de Henestrosa contains three variation sets, one of which is based on *Las vacas*. Nine variation sets can be found in Antonio de Cabezón’s *Obras de musica* (1578), and Willi Apel notes that the most extensive changes are made with respect to the placement and alteration of the melody; these melodic changes “are of basic importance in variation technique.” In the Spanish variations two melodic scenarios are most likely: either the melody is in a lower part, or it is “not recognizable in the variation.”⁷

The early variation sets were secular, even outside the Spanish variations on *Las vacas*. After 1570, composers in Germany, Italy, and England wrote variations on the *passamezzo*, a repeating harmonic structure in either minor (*antico*) or major (*moderno*); in particular, English virginalists, including William Byrd, John Bull, and Orlando Gibbons, wrote a number of *passamezzo* variation sets, the earliest of which appears in the *Dublin Virginal Book* (1570).⁸ Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, who was influenced by the English virginalists, wrote seven secular variation sets, most of which, in contrast to the Spanish variations, feature the melody, either ornamented or unornamented, in the soprano voice.⁹

⁶ Ibid., 353-4.

⁷ Ibid., 266-7.

⁸ Ibid., 270.

⁹ Ibid., 334-5.

The Chorale Variation Set

Sweelinck was responsible for marrying the organ chorale and the variation set into the genre of the *chorale variation set*, of which he wrote four: *Ach Gott vom Himmel sieh darein*, *Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot*, *Erbarm dich mein*, *O Herre Gott*, and *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gemein*. Through interactions with his German students, such as Heinrich Scheidemann and Samuel Scheidt, he became aware of the Lutheran chorales, which would not have been performed in the context of a Calvinist service. Although Cabezón had written psalm arrangements, they were intended for alternation with Gregorian chant, not as complete organ pieces; in this respect, then, Sweelinck “may be regarded as the creator of the chorale variation, which plays an important role in the subsequent evolution of the organ chorale, culminating in Bach’s chorale partitas.”¹⁰

The first significant source of chorale variations in Germany is Scheidt’s *Tabulatura Nova* (1624), which contains twenty-five chorale variation sets. Anderson identifies two techniques that would later become common for variations: (1) *vorimitation*, the usage of a motive of the chorale to anticipate the main melody, and (2) *bicinium*, two-part writing. Unlike Sweelinck, Scheidt gives detailed instructions as to the registration of the variation sets, not only indicating a “strong combination” for the melody but also showing where the melody should be played, based on the voice in which it appears. The output from students and contemporaries of Scheidt, including Heinrich Scheidemann, Matthias Weckmann, and Franz Tunder, is comparatively small; however, it is worth mentioning that Matthias Weckmann, a student of Scheidemann, used a third compositional device, *echo technique*, in his chorale variation sets.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., 332-3.

¹¹ David Anderson, *The Chorale Partita in the Baroque Period* (DMA diss., North Texas State University, 1974), 9-13.

The next generation of German organ composers developed the variation set further by expanding the melodic and harmonic possibilities of the genre. In the fourth variation of *Christus der ist mein Leben* by Johann Pachelbel, the chorale tune, while still appearing in the soprano, “is completely disguised in continuous figuration” in the right hand; similarly, in that piece’s sixth variation, running sixteenth notes contain the tune but obscure it rhythmically and melodically.¹² In northern Germany, Dieterich Buxtehude wrote six chorale variation sets, one of which, *Auf meinen lieben Gott*, is notable for its usage of a French dance rhythm, such as the allemande, courante, or sarabande, for each variation. In his other variation sets, Buxtehude alters the bicinium’s strict *cantus planus* technique, in which the chorale melody appears in long notes, to add varying rhythms and rests.¹³

Georg Böhm, the next important composer of variation sets, was heavily influenced by the French style, as can be seen in the ornaments that he used, including the arpeggiated chord and *port de voix*. Some of the movements of these sets, such as the chorale harmonization of *Ach wie nichtig, ach wie flüchtig*, have a thick, homophonic texture that suggests harpsichord music, while others are similar to the organ variations of Böhm’s compositional predecessors. Like Pachelbel, Böhm uses the technique of disguising the tune in running sixteenth notes or figurations, and he often transfers motives among voices.¹⁴

The chorale variation sets of Johann Sebastian Bach represent the culmination of this tradition, itself an intersection of the organ chorale and the variation set, begun in its current form by Sweelinck and developed by generations of North German organ composers.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 15-6.

¹³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., 19-22.

¹⁵ The chorale settings of Johann Gottfried Walther, a contemporary of Bach, deserve mention here. Although Walther “did not create any new forms or introduce any new musical techniques,” his variation sets represent a link in the continuation of the form, especially as influenced by Pachelbel. (Ibid., 23-25)

Addendum: “Partita”

In common organist parlance, the term “partita” is used to refer to the chorale variation sets of Bach; however, the research is unclear as to whether Bach himself actually referred to them that way. In at least one source for each variation set, the work as a whole is headed *Partite diverse*, with each movement called *Partita* or *Variatio*. Therefore, a more convincing terminological approach would be to avoid the use of the word “partita” to refer to the entire set, instead recognizing that it is more appropriate as a descriptor of each variation. In addition, the opening chorale of each set will not be considered the first variation; in the sources, this practice is followed in BWV 768 but not in any of the other variation sets.

II. SOURCES OF THE VARIATION SETS

Christ, der du bist der helle Tag, BWV 766

The earliest copy of this piece is in Hessische Landes- und Hochschulbibliothek in Darmstadt and dates from the first half of the eighteenth century; an additional copy, from the middle of the century, resides in the Musikbibliothek of Leipziger Städtische Bibliotheken. A later copy, “by or via [Franz] Hauser and [Johann Christian Heinrich] Rinck,” also exists, as does a “reputed autograph . . . probably a copy.”¹⁶ In the Leipzig and Hauser copies, the seventh variation is missing; in Hauser, the sixth variation includes “con pedale si piace” (“pedal ad lib.”), which might not be an original marking.¹⁷

O Gott, du frommer Gott, BWV 767

The only extant copy is in P 802—the letter “P” referring to the manuscript’s location in Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, Berlin—by Johann Tobias Krebs (1690-1762), a student of both Bach

¹⁶ Williams, *Organ Music*, 499.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 502.

and Walther; in this version, each movement is called “Partita.” The nineteenth-century Peters edition “used ‘a very old copy’ from Forkel’s collection.”¹⁸

Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig, BWV 768

In addition to a copy in J. T. Krebs’s hand, three contemporary copies exist: one in the Bibliothèque Inguimbertaine of Carpentras and two in the Musikbibliothek of Leipziger Städtische Bibliotheken; a manuscript recovered from the University of Königsberg may also be contemporary. Later extant copies are possibly from the same source as one of the Leipzig manuscripts.¹⁹

The order and number of variations differ among the sources of BWV 768. The following table compares the five earliest manuscripts, using as a reference the variation order given in the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*:²⁰

	Movements											
<i>Neue Bach-Ausgabe</i>	C	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
J. T. Krebs	C	1	2		4						10	
Carpentras	C	1	2	3*	4*	5	7	11	9	6	8	10
Leipzig (I)	C	1	2	3	4	5	9	6	8	7	11	10
Leipzig (II)	C	1	2	3	4	6	5		8	9	10	11
Königsberg	C	1	2	4	10	3	5	7	11	9	6	8

Note: “C” refers to the chorale, which is not part of the variation count.

* In this manuscript, variations 3 and 4 appear again after and before variation 10, respectively.

Table 1: Variation arrangements in the sources of BWV 768.

The accepted variation order groups all the *manualiter* variations together first, then proceeds to the *pedaliter* movements; this variation set is the only non-canonic set with pedal *obbligato*.

Each possible ordering has its advantages. The scheme in the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* presents the six manuals-only variations first, then the five with pedal; it also frames the set with the four-part, manuals-only chorale at the beginning and the five-part, manuals-and-pedal

¹⁸ Ibid., 503.

¹⁹ Ibid., 506.

²⁰ Ibid.

chorale at the end. This framing is preserved in the second Leipzig manuscript but not in any of the others. In the Carpentras source, the five-part chorale setting appears in the middle of the set, perhaps acting as the centerpiece. Carpentras is also unique for its repetition of the third and fourth variations near the end of the set; these do not bear the label “Partita ___,” so it is possible that they were first versions, re-engraved as part of the set proper. The treatment of the variations in the Königsberg manuscript suggests even spacing of the most complicated variations, the tenth and eleventh; although neither is a candidate for golden-ratio considerations, the idea of dividing a set in thirds has numerological appeal.

Vom Himmel hoch, da komm’ ich her, BWV 769/BWV 769a

Although this piece will not be discussed later, it gives some insight into the variety of source situations in Bach’s work, and it might shed light on eighteenth-century revising and copying habits. The canonic variations exist in two versions: a print version (BWV 769), published in 1787, and an autograph manuscript (BWV 769a) in P 271. Between these sources, as in BWV 768, there is a discrepancy in the order of the movements (with the published version presented as the “standard” order):

	Movement Order				
BWV 769	1	2	3	4	5
BWV 769a	1	2	5	3	4

Table 2: Comparison of movement orders of BWV 769 and 769a.

The later version also has all the canons realized, so it might serve as a better playing copy than the earlier one. Finally, there are a few textual differences between BWV 769 and BWV 769a: not only does the latter have a more elaborate alto line in the canon at the seventh, but it also “contains errors suggesting it was not checked.”²¹

²¹ Ibid., 512-5.

Ach, was soll ich Sünder machen, BWV 770

There are three extant copies of BWV 770: in P 802 by Johann Gottfried Walther; in P 489, dating from the first half of the eighteenth century; and in Brussels Conservatory XY 15.137, from the nineteenth century. P 802 includes manual indications for *Oberwerk* and *Rückpositiv* in the ninth variation, although these were probably added later.²²

III. THEORETICAL MODELS IN THE VARIATIONS

Methodology

In approaching the categorization of the chorale variations, one wants to look for similarities rather than differences, since it is those similarities that will tie the pieces together into a unified body of work. The musical aspect that connects most of these variations is texture—number of voices; homophony and polyphony; behavior of each voice; and treatment of the chorale as it relates to the accompanying parts. Within a textural category, variations can be understood in terms of their motivic content, which usually aligns with one or more rhetorical figures common in Baroque music. Dietrich Bartel, in *Musica Poetica*, describes Joachim Burmeister’s treatise of the same name as “a systematic concept of musical-rhetorical figures, building on the numerous sixteenth-century references to rhetorical figures in music.”²³ In *Bach and the Pedal Clavichord*, Joel Speerstra distills the large body of literature on rhetoric into a small list of figures common in Bach’s music, using the two-part inventions and the Passacaglia in C minor, BWV 582, as models. Table 3 includes the Speerstra figures that are most prevalent in the chorale variations; that is, these figures not only occur most often but also are most likely

²² Ibid., 524-5.

²³ Dietrich Bartel, *Musica Poetica* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 94.

to pervade entire movements, even though other figures are certainly present.²⁴ Finally, some variations resist textural groupings because there are more important considerations, like the unique meter of the 12/8 variations or the last-movement tripartite forms in two of the sets, so these special cases are discussed separately.

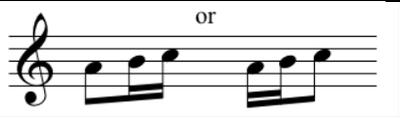
<i>figura corta</i>	
<i>circolo mezzo</i>	
<i>suspirans</i>	

Table 3: Rhetorical figures (Speerstra) used in the Bach chorale variation sets.

1. Harmonized Chorale

BWV 766 (theme)
 BWV 767 (theme)
 BWV 768 (theme)
 BWV 768/11
 BWV 770 (theme)

The opening themes of BWV 766, 767, and 770 establish the chorale tune with harmonizations that are mostly homophonic, with some elaborations in the inner voices; they vary in texture from four to seven parts (Figure 1a). The low range of these large chords is reminiscent of harpsichord writing and bears similarities to earlier variation sets, such as those by Georg Böhm (Figure 1b).

²⁴ Joel Speerstra, *Bach and the Pedal Clavichord* (Rochester, N. Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 121-3.

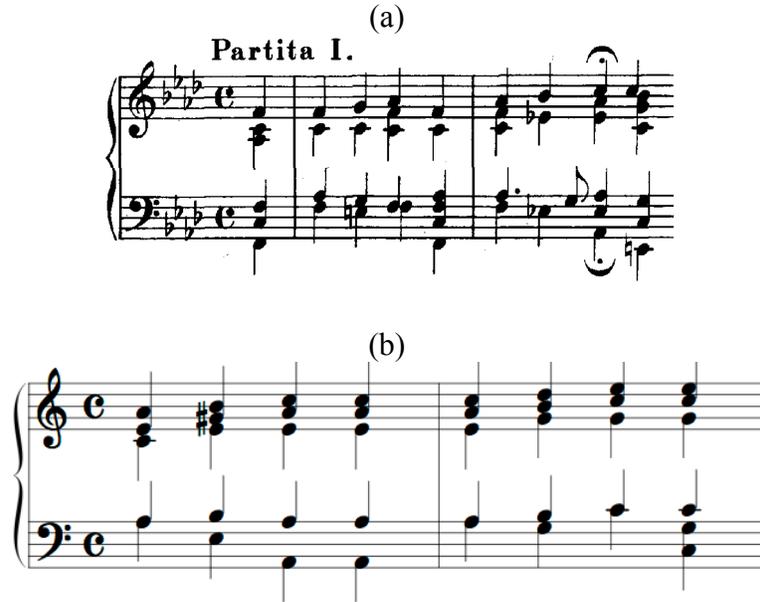


Figure 1: (a) BWV 766 (chorale), mm. 1-2; (b) Böhm, Ach, wie nichtig (chorale), mm. 1-2.

BWV 768, on the other hand, begins with the chorale in strict four-part writing, not unlike Bach's chorale harmonizations in cantatas and motets. The lower three voices are active, particularly with regard to the passing notes in the bass, but the texture is consistent and undeniably homophonic. Compared to the three other variation sets, the exposition of this chorale is further from the pieces of Böhm and Walther and closer to the vocal writing that Bach developed later in life (Figure 2).



Figure 2: BWV 768 (chorale), mm. 1-2.

The eleventh and last variation of BWV 768 consists of a five-part chorale setting, unique in all the variation sets; this texture draws its influence not from the north German variation sets but from the French music of the time. Most of the rhetorical motives are *suspirans* figures

(Figure 3a), with some exceptions, like the scalar passage in the baritone voice of m. 4 (Figure 3b). The two chorale harmonizations of BWV 768 therefore frame the piece, and the five-part *organo pleno* variation can be considered a return home to the original tune after such a wide spectrum of treatments in the ten preceding variations.

(a)

(b)

Figure 3: BWV 768/11. (a) m. 1, suspiciens figures bracketed; (b) m. 4, scalar baritone line.

2. Ornamented Chorale in Bicinium

BWV 766/1
BWV 767/1
BWV 768/1
BWV 770/1
BWV 770/7

The ornamented chorale in bicinium appears at least once in each set, as the first variation. In BWV 766, 767, and 768, the bass voice begins with a motive that pervades the entire piece and, at some point in the variation, is taken over by the soprano. For example, the *figura corta* motive in BWV 767/1 (Figure 4a) first becomes part of the ornamented chorale in mm. 13-15 and appears sporadically thereafter (Figure 4b). The opening leaps in the bass of BWV 768/1 (Figure 5a) occur immediately at the first entrance of the chorale, as embellishments (Figure 5b); this passage is an example of *vorimitation*, as the bass anticipates the soprano's entrance.

(a)

Partita II. (a 2 Clav.)



(b)



Figure 4: BWV 767/1. (a) mm. 1-2; (b) mm. 13-15.



Figure 5: BWV 768/1. (a) m. 1; (b) m. 4.

The two examples of ornamented-chorale bicinium in BWV 770 are starkly different. In the first variation, the bass line acts as a *basso continuo*, with characteristic scalar motion, particularly involving three notes at a time, and octave leaps. Since there are no motives for the soprano to assume later in the piece, the ornamented melody serves throughout as a foil to the bass line, providing rhythmic contrast with dotted figures against the continuo's straight eighths (Figure 6a). In the piece's seventh variation, it is the soprano voice that begins the motivic development with groups of three and four notes, set against a bass line of octave leaps and *suspirans* figures; beginning in m. 7, the bass accepts the soprano's motive (Figure 6b), and the two voices end the piece in dialogue.



Figure 6: BWV 770. (a) var. 1, mm. 1-2; (b) var. 2, mm. 6-7.

3. Perpetual-Motion Chorale in Bicinium

BWV 767/3

BWV 768/3

The third variations of BWV 767 and 768 are two-voice movements in which the chorale tune is obscured by perpetual-motion sixteenth notes. In BWV 767/3, the leaps in the right-hand part suggest a compound melody, with three voices working contrapuntally instead of one.

Figure 7 compares the first four measures of the variation with their voice-leading reduction.²⁵

²⁵ A voice-leading reduction takes a polyphonic texture, such as a compound melody, and synthesizes it into a homophonic texture to clarify harmonic functions that are otherwise not apparent.

(a)

Partita IV.

(b)

Figure 7: BWV 767/3, mm. 1-4. (a) original; (b) voice-leading reduction (notes in parentheses are implied).

The “soprano” line in the reduction is almost exclusively decorated by neighbor tones and, other than the suspension into m. 4, matches the chorale tune perfectly.

BWV 768/3’s right-hand line is more scalar and features more varied elaborations, including thirds and *suspirans* figures (Figure 8a). In addition, individual voices—of which three can be consistently realized (Figure 8b)—are more difficult to discern, with the placement of the chorale (Figure 8c) not always in the soprano.²⁶

²⁶ In m. 4, the second note of the chorale is delayed (“--”) until the third beat, in which two chorale notes occur.

(a)

Var. III.

(b)

S S S S A A S A S A S S S -- B S

(c)

*Figure 8: BWV 768/3, mm. 1-4. (a) variation;
(b) reduction (letters refer to voices in which the chorale tune appears); (c) chorale.*

4. Perpetual-Motion Chorale in Other Textures

BWV 766/3
BWV 770/2
BWV 770/5

The treatment of the chorale tune in these three movements is similar to that in the bicinium examples; the difference is that the left hand plays multiple voices. In BWV 766/3, the

bass line up to m. 8 does not participate fully in the polyphony, having no motives of its own and acting more like a continuo part than anything else (Figure 9a). At that point, the angular motive that has dominated the right hand descends into the bass register before appearing simultaneously in the right and left hands; after that moment, the left hand alternates between the continuo style of the first half of the movement and the later, more melodic style (Figure 9b).

(a)

Partita IV. (a 2 Clav.)



(b)



Figure 9: BWV 766/3. (a) mm. 1-2; (b) mm. 8-10.

The left hand of BWV 770/2 mostly alternates between block chords in the first half of each measure and octave leaps in the second half; however, this pattern changes at some of the cadences, as can be seen in mm. 1-2 (Figure 10). It should also be noted that the soprano line is similar to that of BWV 768/3, with various elaborations of the chorale melody, mostly scales and small leaps. BWV 770/5 has the same left-hand texture—block chords alternating with some more active devices like octave leaps and suspensions—but such devices are much rarer in this example than in the earlier variation (Figure 11).



Figure 10: BWV 770/2, mm. 1-2.



Figure 11: BWV 770/5, mm. 1-2.

5. Unornamented Chorale with Motivic Accompaniment

BWV 768/4
 BWV 768/7
 BWV 768/9

This type of movement occurs exclusively in BWV 768 in four-part and trio textures. The four-part variation, the sixth of the piece, combines two motives in the lower voices: ascending and descending scales, and a double-neighbor figure beginning after a sixteenth-note rest. The latter motive does not always elaborate the “correct” note—that is, the one pitched in the middle of the three. For example, in m. 2, the double-neighbor figure A-F#-G occurs in all four beats; however, only in the first three beats is the G the most harmonically plausible note of the figure, while, in the fourth beat, a 5/3 harmony over the bass note D supports an F#—the lower neighbor of the elaboration figure (Figure 12).



Figure 12: BWV 768/4, mm. 1-2.

The seventh and ninth variations both specify performance on two manuals and pedal and are both in trio texture. The seventh variation has three clear motives: a *suspirans/circolo mezzo* combination, a dotted eighth-sixteenth leap, and a neighbor figure occurring at the end of a beat, as in mm. 1-2 (Figure 12); the first motive, occasionally shortened and placed in dialogue with the third, is more common than the others, as shown in m. 4 (Figure 13). The chorale occurs only in the bass, which presents the tune unadorned, save for some chromatic passing tones.



Figure 13: BWV 768/7, mm. 1-4.

The ninth variation is the only one in which the pedal line is not the bass line; it speaks in the tenor range, while the left hand acts as a bass line (Figure 14). A similar technique is used in *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten*, BWV 647, in which the four-foot registration of the pedal

places the *cantus firmus* in the tenor (Figure 15). This example of Bach’s specifying a registration can be used as justification for similarly registering the variation in BWV 768.



Figure 14: BWV 768/9, mm. 1-2.



Figure 15: BWV 647, mm. 1-6.

6. Chorale with “Basse de Trompette”

BWV 767/5
 BWV 768/5
 BWV 770/4

Three variations in this collection of works boast an unusual texture—a fairly simple statement of the chorale along with other right-hand voices, plus an active, motivic single line in the left hand—also seen in the *basse de trompette* movements of French suites. French music played an important role in Bach’s compositional development, not least because it was in vogue in Germany during the eighteenth century: “the [French] ‘spirit of the age,’ then, constituted a

somewhat intangible yet highly important source for Bach’s knowledge of French style.”²⁷ More specifically, Bach copied Nicolas de Grigny’s entire *Livre d’orgue*, in which one of the movements of the *Gloria* is titled “Basse de Trompette où de Cromorne” and provides an illustration of what this texture resembles in its native music (Figure 16).²⁸



Figure 16: Nicolas de Grigny, *Messe pour Orgue, Gloria*, mm. 42-45.

BWV 767/5 has the left-hand fifth and octave leaps characteristic of a *basse de trompette*, but with some differences, such as the contrast of the left hand’s relentless syncopations with the relatively straightforward rhythms of the right hand (Figure 17a). In addition, the de Grigny and Bach movements show that the left-hand figures in the Bach imply a faster harmonic rhythm (compare Figures 16 and 17b).

²⁷ Victoria Horn, “French Influence in Bach’s Organ Works,” in *J. S. Bach as Organist*, ed. George Stauffer and Ernest May (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986), 257.

²⁸ The *Basse de Trompette* features a solo trumpet line in the left hand against a right-hand accompaniment on softer sounds. As Figure 16 indicates, the solo line often uses fast runs and leaps of fifths and octaves.



Figure 17: (a) BWV 767/5, mm. 3-4; (b) BWV 767/5, mm. 1-2.

For most of BWV 768/5, the number of voices is the same as in BWV 767/5, but the contour of the “trompette” line is markedly different: the focus rests more on two motives—a three-note scale with a neighbor decoration, and third leaps outlining a chord (Figure 18a). In m. 9, the right hand takes over one of the motives briefly, and the two motives speak in concert for the only time; shortly afterwards, the right hand simultaneously articulates a third voice and contributes to the reharmonization of the chorale with a sequence in mm. 12-13 (Figure 18b).

(a)

Var. V. (a 2 Clav.)

(b)

Figure 18: BWV 768/5. (a) mm. 1-2; (b) mm. 9-13.

BWV 770/4 is the only movement in this category with three right-hand voices throughout, although they are less independent than in the above-mentioned variations, instead serving to fill out the harmonies between soprano and bass. The “trompette” line here is fairly consistent in its motivic occurrences—scales for the first three beats, with the exception of some leaps to ascend or descend in register, and arpeggios for the fourth (Figure 19).

Partita V. (a 2 Clav.)

Figure 19: BWV 770/4, mm. 1-2.

7. Ornamented Soprano Chorale with Motivic Accompaniment

BWV 766/2
BWV 766/5
BWV 767/2
BWV 767/4
BWV 767/6
BWV 767/7
BWV 768/2
BWV 768/6
BWV 768/8
BWV 770/3
BWV 770/6

This variation type is by far the most common in Bach's non-canonic variation sets. In Bach's output, the largest set of ornamented chorales is in the *Orgelbüchlein*, which the composer wrote while he was in Weimar. Since the partitas cannot be dated, one cannot say whether one set influenced another; however, considering the *Orgelbüchlein* chorales as archetypal examples can help illuminate the nature of the chorale variations that are in this style.

An *Orgelbüchlein* chorale has three hallmarks—an ornamented tune in the soprano, a single motive that pervades the piece, and lack of *vorimitation*. In *Lob sei dem allmächtigen Gott*, BWV 602, the rhythmic idea of two sixteenths plus two thirty-seconds, followed by four sixteenths, happens in nearly every measure; the only voice that is immune to the motivic saturation is the soprano (Figure 20). For a chorale melody that itself uses the motive, one can turn to *Mit Fried' und Freud' ich fahr' dahin*, BWV 616. The *figura corta* device that bounces back and forth between the alto and tenor voices reaches the soprano in m. 4, and that figure becomes part of the ornamentation of the chorale tune (Figure 21).



Figure 20: BWV 602, mm. 1-2.



Figure 21: BWV 616, mm. 3-4.

The latter example is closer to what can be found in the variation sets—a soprano chorale melody which, in addition to slight ornamentation, contains the motivic content of the other voices. As these movements are each based largely on a single idea, they will be grouped by rhetorical figure or other motive in the following order: (1) *figura corta*, (2) *suspirans*, (3) syncopated arpeggio, (4) *circulatio*, and (5) 12/8 meter.

This study broadens the interpretation of the *figura corta* used by Burmeister and later writers, instead identifying it by the presence of two short notes at the end of a beat, then some continuation on the next beat; the figure can thus be separated into two parts, the short notes and the continuation. Both variations that use this motive, BWV 766/2 and 767/7, treat the short notes the same way, but their continuations differ. In BWV 766/2, the continuation involves a skip, leading either to an arpeggio, as in m. 1, or to a suspension, as in m. 2 (Figure 22a, with *figura corta* motives bracketed). The arpeggios in this continuation serve to confirm the harmonies already established, and they often prepare suspensions.

When the chorale is itself elaborated by the figure, the melodic note generally happens in a metrically stronger position (on the beat or the half-beat); however, occasionally the figure actually leaps above the melody to create a temporary descant (also bracketed). Figure 22b shows how the elaboration of the actual tune, combined with the descant, affects the placement of the melodic notes.

(a)

(b)

Figure 22: BWV 766/2. (a) mm. 1-2; (b) mm. 3-4.

If the *figura corta* continuations generally confirm the harmonies in BWV 766/2, they mostly advance them in BWV 767/7 by providing important chord tones (Figure 23a). This variation is unique because it is the only truly chromatic variation in Bach's sets, pushing the boundaries of temperament and the human ear. For example, in m. 3, the motives in alto and tenor lead to A-flat and F, which are unmistakably chord tones; in m. 4, the motives in alto and bass lead similarly to important members of their respective chords, whose Roman numerals are

given below the staff. It is also worth noting that the direction of this movement's figures differs from that in BWV 766/2: the *figura corta* is much more likely to change direction at the continuation, thereby creating a neighbor-note idiom, as in m. 1 (Figure 23b), where it decorates the chorale melody (Figure 23c).

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 23: BWV 767/7. (a) mm. 3-4; (b) m. 1; (c) chorale of m. 1.

The definition of a *suspirans* figure will, like that of the *figura corta*, be broadened here to include a continuation on the next beat. In BWV 767/2, the motive goes in both directions—a fairly common occurrence in most Baroque music—but the way that it elaborates the chorale is surprisingly straightforward. Instead of occasionally obscuring the notes of the melody, it

highlights them by placing the melodic notes either on the first note of the figure or on the downbeat of the continuation, as in mm. 1-2 (Figure 24a). This technique is executed with few exceptions, which mostly appear at cadences. In addition, the motives act in dialogue as interlude material, as in the soprano and alto parts of m. 6 and the tenor and bass parts of m. 7 (Figure 24b). Figure 24 also shows that the motive's continuation is generally one longer note on the beat, which makes room for subsequent motives to speak almost immediately.

Figure 24: BWV 767/2. (a) mm. 1-2; (b) mm. 5-7.

The texture of BWV 767/4 is similar to that of BWV 767/2: both are *suspirans* trios with the chorale in the soprano, and both even include the B-flat at the end of the second phrase. However, instead of providing a longer-value point of arrival, the motive's continuation in BWV 767/4 often adds more sixteenth notes, extending past the second beat of the figure to complete a scale, as in mm. 1-2 (Figure 25a, representative motives bracketed)²⁹. The range of the

²⁹ Wolfgang Caspar Printz would consider this construction a combination of two figures, the *suspirans* and the *tirata perfecta*.

ornamented chorale melody is also larger here, stretching from a B-flat 5 to an E-flat 3 in the span of just three measures (Figure 25b).

Figure 25 consists of two musical excerpts, (a) and (b), from BWV 767/4. Excerpt (a) shows two staves of music. The first staff has two annotations: 'susprians without added scale' pointing to a group of notes in the first measure, and 'susprians with added scale' pointing to a group of notes in the second measure. Excerpt (b) shows two staves of music. The first staff has an annotation 'B>5' with an arrow pointing to a note in the first measure. The second staff has an annotation 'E<3' with an arrow pointing to a note in the third measure.

Figure 25: BWV 767/4. (a) mm. 1-2; (b) mm. 7-9.

Later in that set, in the sixth variation, the *susprians* figure returns but in eighth, rather than sixteenth, notes; in each instance, it occurs over a span of at least two beats, not counting a beginning rest or an extended continuation. The issue of a two-beat figure in a three-beat measure brings up a metrical question: how does the usage of this figure contribute to the hierarchy of strong and weak beats in the measure? Figure 26 compares the metrical effect of the one-beat motive to that of the two-beat motive.

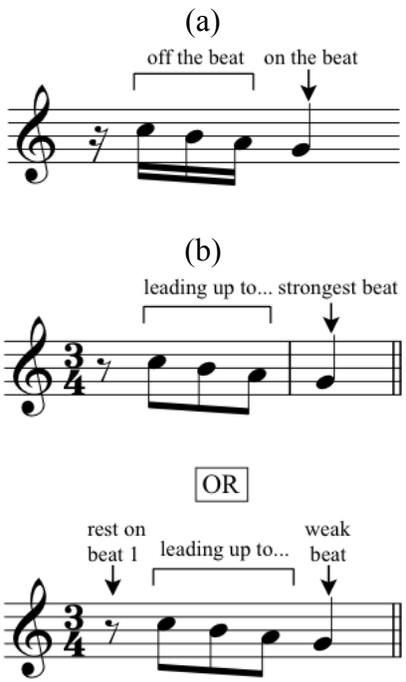


Figure 26: Comparison of suspirans motives, (a) over two beats in any meter; (b) over three beats in 3/4.

Since beat 1 is the only truly strong beat of a 3/4 measure, it is important for the *suspirans* to “land”—that is, to begin its continuation—on the first beat (as in mm. 1-4); a less strong, but still plausible, point of continuation is beat 3 (as in m. 5 of Figure 27a). In fact, the only time the *suspirans* figure does not emphasize either the first or third beat is in m. 21, where the fourth note of the figure lands on beat two; this event coincides with the highest note of the piece, C6 (Figure 27b).



Figure 27: BWV 767/6. (a) mm. 1-4; (b) mm. 20-21.

The next motive that occurs in the chorale variations comprises an arpeggio of three notes, beginning off the beat and tied to the next beat. This motive, which will here be called the syncopated arpeggio, can be considered rhythmically similar to the *suspirans*, but its function at first is more harmonic than melodic. In BWV 768/2, the arpeggio almost always ties into a suspension, whose resolution is elaborated with its lower neighbor; it begins in the tenor but almost immediately jumps up to the soprano, where it ornaments the chorale (Figure 28a). As the variation continues, the arpeggio occasionally does not tie over to the next beat, instead landing on a chord tone, as in the alto and tenor voices in m. 10 (Figure 28b).

(a)

Var. II.

(b)

Figure 28: BWV 768/2. (a) mm. 1-2; (b) m. 10.

The syncopated arpeggio also appears in BWV 770/3, but it ties to a suspension less frequently than it ties to a note already consonant with the bass, as in the tenor and alto of m. 1. When it does tie into a dissonance, the resolution is less obvious; for example, in m. 2, the arpeggio on beat 1, split between the tenor and alto, ties to a fourth above the bass, part of a 6/4 chord on D (Figure 29a). The motivic use in BWV 770/3 differs from BWV 768/2 in another way: the notes of the arpeggio, as they are played, are often held to create a rolled chord, as in the tenor of m. 1 and the right hand of m. 9, which defies four-voice counterpoint in favor of that chordal texture (Figure 29b). Such a technique is not uncommon in the partitas, but it is usually confined to the last chord of a variation rather than included in the middle of the chorale.

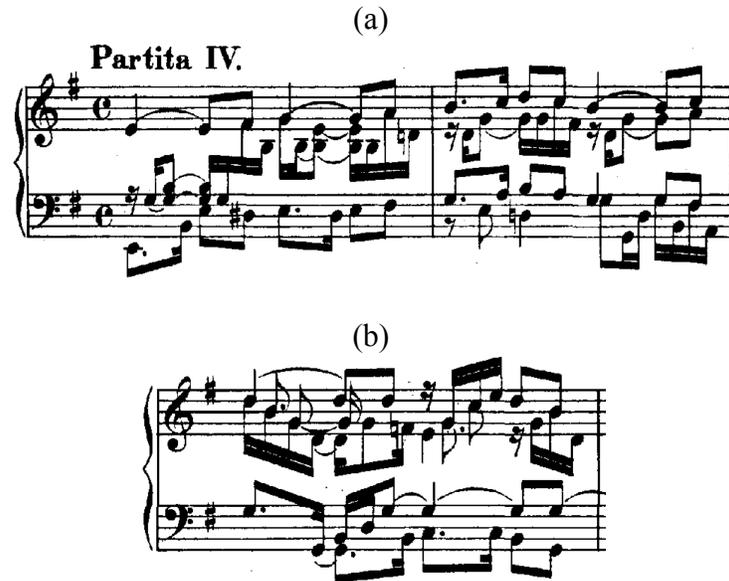


Figure 29: BWV 770/3. (a) mm. 1-2; (b) m. 9.

BWV 768/6, with its 24/16 time signature, stands out from the other motivic variations not only because of its meter, but also because of its prevailing motive, which Johann Kircher defined as the *circulatio*, here altered to fit in compound meter.³⁰ This motive, which does not appear in any of the other chorale variations, involves a neighbor figure followed by a scale in the opposite direction of the neighbor note (e.g., a lower neighbor would be followed by an ascending scale). Each phrase of the chorale, if it contains the motive, is elaborated at its beginning (m. 1), with an occasional motivic extension at the end (m. 6), as shown in Figures 30a and 30b.

³⁰ Bartel, *Musica Poetica*, 109-110.

(a)

Var. VIII.

(b)

Figure 30: BWV 768/8. (a) m. 1; (b) m. 6.

The three remaining variations—BWV 766/5, BWV 768/6, and BWV 770/6—are quite different from the others in this category because they are in 12/8. Ordinarily, they would be grouped with other variations according to their motives, but the fact that three of the chorale variation sets contain 12/8 variations suggests that this kind of movement is special. In BWV 766/5 and BWV 770/6, the 12/8 variations appear toward the end of the piece; this placement calls to mind the dance-like variation in Sweelinck’s *Est-ce mars* (Figure 31).

6de Variatie.

Figure 31: Sweelinck, Est-ce Mars, var. 6

All three variations contain a characteristic leaping figure, Printz's *salto semplice*, but each treats the figure's continuation differently.³¹ BWV 766/5 and BWV 770/6 involve consonant notes on the beat following the motive, either tied over from the leap or as a new note (Figures 32a and 32b). On the other hand, the leaps of BWV 768/6 tie into dissonances, which are resolved by suspensions almost everywhere (Figure 32c).

(a)

Partita VI.



(b)

Partita VII.



(c)

Var. VI.



Figure 32: Opening measures of (a) BWV 766/5, (b) BWV 770/6, and (c) BWV 768/6.

³¹ Ibid., 120.

8. Ornamented Non-Soprano Chorale with Motivic Accompaniment

BWV 766/4

BWV 766/6

Sometimes, the chorale appears in a voice other than the soprano; BWV 766/4 involves a tenor *cantus firmus*, surrounded by motives. The motive at play here is a three-note modified double-neighbor figure—(1) lower or upper note, (2) upper or lower note, (3) main note—leading into a continuation. The tenor chorale undergoes this motivic treatment in mm. 6-7 (Figure 33), m. 15, and m. 17. Other than those measures, the ornamentation is restricted to passing tones and some limited neighbor-note figures.



Figure 33: BWV 766/4, mm. 6-7.

The chorale in BWV 766/6 is in the bass; since the directive *con pedale si piace* may have been added by a later copyist, it is perhaps safest to consider this variation as a two-stave *manualiter* piece.³² The prevailing motive here is a dotted rhythm with at least one leap, often two; it is actually the chorale tune that first displays this motive, along with the alto, in m. 1, with that same motive happening on the offbeat of the tenor beginning on the second half of beat 2 (Figure 34a). While other chorale variations generally limit simultaneous motivic occurrences to two voices, this variation gives three simultaneous statements of the motive several times, as in, for instance, mm. 1-2, 4, and 8 (the last of which is shown in Figure 34b).

³² Williams, *Organ Music*, 502.



Figure 34: BWV 766/6. (a) m. 1; (b) m. 8.

9. Other Single-Section Variations

BWV 768/10
 BWV 770/8

Written for two manuals and pedal, BWV 768/10 is the longest and most contrapuntally complex variation of the set, making significant use of more than one motive. Although a *figura corta* passage begins the variation, it only reappears once more; instead, the first important motive is in the soprano and tenor voices of the second measure—a dotted-quarter-eighth-quarter figure that here occurs in two directions simultaneously (Figure 35a). The second reoccurring motive begins in m. 6, the kind of slowed-down *suspirans* figure also present in BWV 767/6, which happens nearly every time a string of parallel thirds and sixths appears (Figure 35b). The true chorale in this variation is marked as such—thus making what preceded it an example of *vorimitation*—and it is unornamented throughout the variation; however, as a twist, or perhaps a

foreshadowing of the final five-part variation of this set, a second voice grows out of the chorale in the penultimate phrase (Figure 35c).³³

(a)

(b)

(c)

Choral. *a 2 voci.*

Figure 35: BWV 768/10. (a) mm. 1-2; (b) mm. 6-7; (c) mm. 75-76.

³³ French music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often includes dialogue between the *Cornet* and a reed; although no manual changes are specified in the right hand, registering the *vorimitation* sections on the *Cornet* and the long-note chorale on a reed would be in accordance with the performance practice of the time.

BWV 770/8 makes extensive use of echo technique, developed by Sweelinck in his own variation sets and fantasias; however, a manual change does not always indicate an echo. For example, the passage in mm. 1-8 indeed shows an echo of each chorale snippet (Figure 36a), but the *piano* passage beginning in m. 37 begins a new portion of the chorale, ending the penultimate phrase (Figure 36b).

(a)

Partita IX. (a 2 Clav.)
Adagio.



(b)



Figure 36: BWV 770/8. (a) mm. 1-8; (b) mm. 37-42.

10. Multi-Sectional Variations

BWV 767/8

BWV 770/9

The multi-sectional variation provides in miniature the alternating fast-slow structure common in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century multi-movement works; two of the chorale variations not only have this structure, but also have some elements of echo technique in the form of solo-*tutti* interplay. In BWV 770/9, *Oberwerk* marks the *tutti* sections, while *Rückpositiv* indicates a solo section. The string figurations in this variation, especially arpeggios like those in m. 1 (Figure 37), recall the Italianate concerto form, although the absence of a *ritornello*

precludes labeling it as such. In addition, the proportions of the movements are lopsided: the second Allegro, lasting fifty-three measures, dominates the piece (Table 4).



Figure 37: BWV 770/9, m. 1.

(b)

Allegro	Adagio	Allegro	Adagio
mm.	mm.	mm.	mm.
1-5	6-9	10-62	62-65

Table 4: Section lengths in BWV 770/9.

The form of BWV 767/8, as shown in Table 5, is more equally divided between its three movements, and the *piano* passages serve purely as echoes of the *forte* phrases until m. 17, where the sequence is continued through the manual changes (Figure 38a). In the Andante section, the two manuals work together as solo and accompaniment for four measures before returning to the echo scheme (Figure 38b). The Presto mostly dispenses with the two-manual design, significantly elaborating the final phrase of the chorale and restating its cadence; in the last three measures, the *piano* returns, recalling the octave descent of the previous measure (beginning with C5) but stopping at a five-note descent (Figure 38c).

[Allegro]	Andante	Presto
mm.	mm.	mm.
1-26	27-36	36-48

Table 5: Section lengths in BWV 767/8.

(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 38: BWV 767/8. (a) mm. 17-18; (b) mm. 27-30; (c) mm. 46-47.

IV. REHARMONIZATION AS VARIATION

The variations have so far been considered almost solely in terms of their melodic and motivic content. While the chorales are indeed subject to the same motivic treatment as the other voices, they also undergo reharmonization during the variation sets. One important question is if these harmonic changes are isolated incidents, or if they occur as some kind of large-scale progression or composing-out over the course of a set. Here, a “harmonization” will be defined as the figured bass and cadence for a short melodic phrase, and, in two of the chorale variations,

how phrases are harmonized plays a prominent role in the overall effect of the piece, when heard as a whole.³⁴

In the chorale of BWV 767, the melody $\hat{1}-\hat{2}-\hat{3}$ is supported by $\hat{3}-\flat\hat{7}-\hat{1}$ in the bass, forming a contrapuntal cadence in C minor (Figure 39a), an idea that carries over into the first two variations. However, in the third variation, the bass line $\hat{1}-\flat\hat{7}-\hat{3}$ is given for those three melodic notes, thus creating an authentic cadence in E-flat major; this harmonization also appears in the fifth variation (Figure 39b). The last variation brings these two harmonizations together, initially giving a bass line emphasizing C minor ($\hat{1}-\flat\hat{7}-\hat{1}$ in *forte*, $\hat{3}-\hat{5}-\hat{1}$ in *piano*) but then providing a cadential extension that modulates to E-flat and confirms that key for three more measures (Figure 39c); this passage could be seen as reconciling the two opposing harmonic trajectories of that three-note melody. In m. 30, the process is reversed—an initial gesture of $\hat{2}-\hat{3}$ in the bass first supports $6/3-5/3$, suggesting E-flat major, but, when that gesture repeats, the figures change to $\flat 6/3-6/3$, arriving in C minor (Figure 39d).

³⁴ Most melody and bass lines will be shown here with scale degree symbols, which are the numbers 1 through 7, one for each note of the diatonic scale, topped with carets. An accidental next to a scale degree number denotes chromatic alteration. Figured bass will be written as $5/3$, $6/3$, etc.

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Figure 39: BWV 767. (a) chorale, mm. 1-2; (b) var. 3, mm. 1-2; (c) var. 8, mm. 3-5; (d) var. 8, m. 30.

The melody $\hat{5}-\hat{5}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}$ in the last phrase of BWV 768 allows for a number of harmonic transformations not by exploring different key areas, as in BWV 767, but by employing

sequences. The opening chorale's bass line for the melody is not sequential—it is, once the passing tones in the bass are removed, $\hat{1}-\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{1}-\hat{\#7}-\hat{1}$ (Figure 40a). Beginning in m. 28 of the first variation, a descending-second sequence³⁵ contains the original four-note melody, each note of which is marked with an “x” (Figure 40b). This new harmonization does not reappear until the fifth variation, when, in m. 12, the same sequence supports the same melodic notes, though interlocking seventh chords are added, which contribute to the climax of this movement (Figure 40c). The tenth variation contains an even more elaborate sequence, climactic because it marks the first time in the movement that the pedal part is active (Figure 40d). The last variation of this set, with five consistent voices, also expands the interval of the sequence from descending seconds to descending thirds (bracketed in Figure 40e).

³⁵ This sequence is approximate: the bass note of A in m. 29 needs reinterpretation as an F to make an exact copy.

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

(e)

Figure 40: BWV 768. (a) original harmonization (bass passing tones removed); (b) var. 1, mm. 28-29; (c) var. 5, m. 12; (d) var. 10, mm. 92-95; (e) var. 11, mm. 12-13.

V. CONCLUSION

This study of the chorale variation sets of J. S. Bach shows that the variations can be connected to each other in terms of texture, melody, form, and harmony in the same way that others have drawn connections among the composer's free and fugal works. The main musical aspect that the variations share is motivic, with only a few melodic ideas driving many of the ornamented-chorale movements; other movements can be grouped according to texture—such as *bicinium* or trio—and form.

Further research should include more contrapuntal analysis of the variations, including devices like invertible and triple counterpoint, in order to place these works in the context of other Bach compositions. There is still much to be learned about the Bach variation sets, and publication will help to educate novice and expert organists on how to approach and consider these wonderful pieces.

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