BACH AND THE BEAUTY OF CHRIST:
A STUDY IN THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS

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Abstract

This dissertation attempts to shed explanatory light on the work of Johann Sebastian Bach by situating it within the broader framework of Lutheran theological aesthetics. Although Bach has long been considered one of the most influential musicians in European history, he wrote very little about himself and the personal convictions that inspired his music. This vacuum has prompted theologians and musicologists to explore – and speculate about – the nature of those convictions and the historical sources that shaped them. Here I argue that Bach was a sophisticated interpreter of Lutheran aesthetics, who used music to make the beauty of Christ’s cosmic redemption more audible to his listeners.

In order to defend this thesis, I adopt the following methodology: in chapter one, I present a conception of Bachian aesthetics from both theoretical and practical perspectives. In chapter two, I open up a historical vantage point for understanding that aesthetic conception: the thought of Martin Luther and his followers. Although Luther has typically been considered an anti-aesthetic figure, I follow the recent Luther scholarship of Mark C. Mattes and Miikka E. Anttila, who argue that Luther held to a radically Christocentric conception of beauty. After presenting my condensed rendering of Lutheran aesthetics, in chapter three I seek to situate music within that theo-dramatic framework. For Luther, music is one of the most beautiful gifts of God, which was created through Christ and can help Christians gain a foretaste of the heavenly beauty achieved by Christ. In chapter four, then, I re-read chapter one in light of chapters two and three, with the goal of presenting Bach as a sophisticated interpreter of Lutheran
aesthetics. In chapter five, I pivot to consider the implications of this study for the modern academy and church, two locales that are critical for both Bach and this dissertation. In particular, I suggest that neither the contemporary academy nor the contemporary church offers an entirely hospitable locale for studying and understanding Bachian aesthetics. The dissertation closes by offering several alternative cultural locales for understanding Bachian aesthetics, to which both the contemporary academy and church should pay more attention.
For my parents, Greg and Susan Jones,
whose tireless commitment to Duke Divinity School
helped make this dissertation possible
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I am also grateful to the various Bach scholars who offered feedback on a condensed version of this dissertation, which I presented at the Bach Network meeting at Madingley Hall, Cambridge, UK, in July 2019. Although the bulk of this dissertation had already been written by that time, the questions and comments I received forced me to rethink some of my assumptions and sharpen the focus of my argument.

Lastly, I owe a great deal to a variety of people associated with Duke University, especially Duke University Divinity School, Duke University Chapel, and Duke University Music Department. When I arrived at Duke University as an undergraduate student in 2005, I had recently sung Bach’s B-Minor Mass and St. Matthew Passion with Rodney Wynkoop and the Choral Society of Durham. I was already well smitten with Bach by that point, but wanted to explore theology, philosophy, music, and literature more broadly. So I did, and I am especially grateful to the following people for expanding my academic education in ways that directly benefitted this dissertation:

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Finally, I must acknowledge my advisor, Jeremy Begbie, without whom this dissertation would simply be impossible. I first encountered him toward the end of my undergraduate years, when I was trying to decide between pursuing a path in academic theology or musical performance. Jeremy convinced me that there could be (and had been already!) a fruitful interaction between Christian theology and music, and I began thinking about music (especially Bach’s music) in a more rigorous and theological way. This dissertation is a direct result of his influence, and it should be viewed as an outgrowth of his work at DITA (Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts).
Introduction

“Among all the major Reformers,” Mark C. Mattes writes, “Luther would seem the least likely source for finding anything of significance for beauty. Indeed, prima facie we might think of Luther as the enemy of beauty.”¹ We might think so because some of the most influential twentieth-century Christian theologians, such as Rudolf Bultmann and Hans Urs von Balthasar, made such a claim rather explicitly.² But we also might think so because of Luther’s typical absence in histories of beauty, from Umberto Eco’s classic account,³ to Natalie Carnes’ recent one,⁴ to Wikipedia entries for “beauty,” “aesthetics,” and “aesthetics of music.” Whether in the scholarly or popular historical imagination, it seems that Luther only appears as an enemy of beauty, if he appears at all.

As the subtitle of his book suggests, Mattes has aimed to “reappraise” this situation, arguing that “the gospel as Luther understood it opens a horizon that gives sinners access to beauty and a message that is itself so beautiful that desperate, repentant sinners crave it.”⁵ This is a radically Christocentric notion of beauty, one in which Luther expresses “not only ‘existentialist’ depth but also cosmic and eschatological breadth.”⁶ For Luther, Christ is beautiful not simply because he changed the existential status of sinners by dying for them on the cross; Christ is beautiful because he died on the cross

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¹ Mark Mattes, Martin Luther’s Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 1.
² See 2.1.1.
⁵ Mattes, 1-2.
⁶ Ibid., 2.
for the redemption of all of creation. As Mattes puts it, “it is gospel beauty, in which Christ absorbs the ugliness and impurity of sin and bears it away never to be found, that opens the horizon of appreciating creation beauty and restoring humans to creation as gift, the paradise that God intends this good earth to be.”

In other words, we understand and appreciate the beauty of creation not primarily through philosophical speculation about God (or what is often called “natural theology”), much less through attempted self-justification or aesthetic self-designation; we learn about it through the self-giving love of Jesus Christ, who embraced his crucifixion in order to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. When we believe in Christ and his cross, we begin to see creation as a gift of divine love, and the cross as a dramatic midpoint between creation and eschatological consummation. For Luther, this outpouring of divine love, manifested in the life and work of Jesus Christ, is what defines Beauty. So, could it be the case that those who considered Luther an enemy of beauty were looking in the wrong places? That instead of looking into his Christology and musical theology, they focused too narrowly on his critiques of philosophy and metaphysics? And what if, on the other hand, one of Luther’s most talented and celebrated followers understood “the aesthetic Luther” long before them, and much better than any of them?

In this dissertation, I am arguing that such a figure existed, and that his name was Johann Sebastian Bach. In particular, I am arguing that Bach was a sophisticated interpreter of Lutheran aesthetics, who used music to make the beauty of Christ’s cosmic redemption more audible to his listeners. On the one hand, such a claim might seem obvious. After all, Bach was raised a Lutheran, died a Lutheran, and his intervening

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7 Ibid., 14.
biography bears many marks of devotion to Lutheran theology and the Lutheran church. On the other hand, this claim should not seem obvious, and for three specific reasons. First, some musicologists have questioned the assumption that Bach’s music is best explained in the context of Lutheranism. Second, even those musicologists who acknowledge the formative influence of Lutheranism on Bach have not attempted to explain this relationship in aesthetic terms (or simply deny the possibility altogether). Third, as we saw above, the Christian theologians who might have otherwise stepped in to draw such a line of aesthetic influence have not yet done so.

This collective neglect of the theological roots of Bachian aesthetics is reflected by Bach’s entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, which ends with an unsatisfactory interpretation of the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate:

On 14 May 1737 J.A. Scheibe, in his journal *Der critische Musikus*, published a weighty criticism of Bach’s manner of composition. This seems to have come as a severe blow to Bach. Evidently at his urging, the Leipzig lecturer in rhetoric Johann Abraham Birnbaum responded with a defence, printed in January 1738, which Bach distributed among his friends and acquaintances. The affair developed into a public controversy, the literary conduct of which, at least, was suspended in 1739 after further polemical writings by Scheibe and Birnbaum. Scheibe acknowledged Bach’s extraordinary skill as a performer on the organ and the harpsichord, but sharply criticized his compositions, claiming that Bach ‘by his bombastic and intricate procedures deprived them of naturalness and obscured their beauty by an excess of art’. Birnbaum’s not particularly skillful replies fail to recognize the true problem, which lies in a clash of irreconcilable stylistic ideals. Nevertheless, his discussion of naturalness and artificiality in Bach’s style, and his definition of harmony as an accumulation of counterpoint, make some important statements about the premises and unique character of Bach’s compositional art, and Bach himself must have been involved in their formulation. This is clear above all in the way in which ‘the nature of music’ is represented, with references to biographical details (such as the challenge to Marchand) and

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8 See 4.4.3 b), and the reference to Friedrich Blume in 4.3.8.
9 See 4.4.3 a), c), and d).
express mention of composers and works in Bach’s library (Palestrina, Lotti and Grigny). The controversy smouldered on for several more years. Mizler, too, shook a lance, pointing to ‘the latest taste’ in Bach’s cantata style (‘so well does our Kapellmeister know how to suit himself to his listeners’). In the end Scheibe climbed down, with a conciliatory review (1745) of the Italian Concerto in which he apologized handsomely (‘I did this great man an injustice’).”

Yet as Mizler shows above, the division between Scheibe and Birnbaum cannot be reduced solely to “a clash of irreconcilable stylistic ideals,” with Scheibe representing the galant and Birnbaum (and Bach) representing the non-galant, such as “old-fashioned” dense counterpoint or heavy uses of dissonance. After all, the Italian Concerto is but one of many examples of Bach’s ability to write in the galant style. The “true problem” cannot simply be stylistic, because Bach had already “reconciled” both styles in his work. The “true problem,” according to Bach and Birnbaum, is that Scheibe failed to understand Lutheran aesthetics properly. From their perspective, Scheibe had ignored the impact of “the fall” on musical nature, and because he ignored the fall, he could not understand the cross of Christ. And because he could not understand the cross of Christ, he could not understand why Luther considered music to be “one of the most beautiful gifts of God.” For as we will see, Luther taught Bach to believe that music could offer listeners a foretaste of the heavenly beauty achieved by Christ, and Bach wanted his listeners to taste that beauty as intensely as possible.

**Genre and Methodology**

11 See 3.2.3.
As a dissertation in the Doctor of Theology (Th.D.) program at Duke University Divinity School, I intend this to be a work of theology. “Theology” is a broad term, however, signifying forms of reasoning (logos) about God (theos). Accordingly, I should clarify that this will be a work of Christian theology, and not a work of generic theology or the theological work of other religions. Within Christian theology, this work touches on a variety of sub-disciplines, which I will now explain.

Because I am attempting to situate music within an overarching theo-dramatic system, this dissertation could be considered a work of systematic theology. It could also be considered a work of historical theology, since I am attempting to trace a line of aesthetic influence from Luther to Bach, who lived two hundred years apart from each other. Third, it could also be considered a work of practical theology, since the practice of music making generated a large part of my source material, and my own practice of making Bach’s music has informed this dissertation throughout. To put the matter more bluntly, without the practice of music making by Luther, Bach, and various intervening figures, this dissertation would not exist at all. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this dissertation could be considered a work of evangelistic theology. Bach has been sincerely dubbed “the fifth evangelist,” and that appellation has just as sincerely been mocked. In my own judgment, the idea that he should be put on par with the gospel writers would likely cause Bach to recoil in disgust. However, the idea that Bach is one of the most

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12 See 5.1.1, footnote 5.
13 For example, in a Q&A session at the July 2019 meeting of the Bach Network at Madingley Hall, Cambridge, I asked Christoph Wolff if he considers Bach a theologian, and if so, what sort. He responded that he “certainly would not consider him the fifth evangelist,” which elicited a round of mocking laughter.
powerful Christian evangelists in church history is far from ridiculous. Personally, Bach’s music has often made me feel like Dostoyevsky’s “ridiculous man,” whose unexpectedly beautiful dream transforms his deathly despair into life-affirming hope:

First of all I leapt up in great amazement: nothing like this had ever happened to me before, not even in the most trivial detail; I had never, for instance, fallen asleep like this in my arm-chair. While I was standing and coming to myself I suddenly caught sight of my revolver lying loaded, ready – but instantly I thrust it away! Oh, now, life, life! I lifted up my hands and called upon eternal truth, not with words, but with tears; ecstasy, immeasurable ecstasy flooded my soul. Yes, life and spreading the good tidings! Oh, I at that moment resolved to spread the tidings, and resolved it, of course, for my whole life. I go to spread the tidings, I want to spread the tidings—of what? Of the truth, for I have seen it, have seen it with my own eyes, have seen it in all its glory.

And since then I have been preaching!

This dissertation is the product of a similar motivation. Bach’s music has enabled me to hear and even in some sense see divine glory. And once someone has seen and heard such glory, how can they not spread its tidings?

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14 Consider, for example, the way Masaaki Suzuki describes Bach’s evangelical impact in Japan, a country ravaged by depression and suicide: “What people need in this situation is hope in the Christian sense of the word, but hope is an alien idea here,” says the renowned organist Masaaki Suzuki, founder and conductor of the Bach Collegium Japan. He is the driving force behind the “Bach boom” sweeping Japan during its current period of spiritual impoverishment. “Our language does not even have an appropriate word for hope,” Suzuki says. “We either use *ibo*, meaning desire, or *nozomi*, which describes something unattainable.” After every one of the Bach Collegium’s performances Suzuki is crowded on the podium by non-Christian members of the audience who wish to talk to him about topics that are normally taboo in Japanese society—death, for example. “And then they inevitably ask me to explain to them what ‘hope’ means to Christians.” Uwe Siemon-Netto, “J.S. Bach in Japan,” First Things, June 2000 issue. [https://www.firstthings.com/article/2000/06/j-s-bach-in-japan](https://www.firstthings.com/article/2000/06/j-s-bach-in-japan) (accessed October 9, 2020).

As a work of theology that deals directly with musical subject matter, I have also made an attempt to do basic musicological work. I am an experienced vocal performer who has performed Bach’s music many times as both a chorister and soloist, but I am not a trained musicologist. However, I would maintain that the musicological claims of this dissertation are sound, and are rarely (if ever) divergent from established scholarship in the world of Bachian musicology. This dissertation mainly diverges from established Bachian scholarship on the level of interpretation, where basic musicological findings can be shared but the meaning of them is hotly contested. In this dissertation, I contend that Lutheran theology provides the overarching framework for understanding Bach’s music, and that even the most brilliant musicological analysis confirms that thesis.

In order to defend this thesis, I am adopting the following methodology, which can best be presented through a visual analogy: Chapter One, Bachian aesthetics, is like a stained glass window in a dark cathedral: we can only see the frame and strips of lead. Had Bach written an extant “treatise on beauty” or something similar, this window would likely already radiate with color by this point in the history of Bach studies. However, given the scant documentary evidence we have, we need additional sources to provide that radiating, explanatory light. In Chapters Two and Three, I set those lights up by presenting an outline of pre-Bachian Lutheran aesthetics and the role of music therein. In Chapter Four, then, I attempt to shine the explanatory light of Lutheran aesthetics through the window of Bachian aesthetics presented in Chapter One. The result, I hope, is a portrait of Bachian aesthetics in radiant color.

Flow of Chapters
In Chapter One, I develop a conception of Bachian aesthetics through both theoretical and practical lenses. By “theoretical,” I mean talking about the beauty of music, and doing so at a remove from the actual making of music, whether the process of composing it or performing it. In this section, I will attempt to show that Bach believed music to be naturally beautiful but flawed, and that the phenomenon of dissonance is one such flaw. I will also show that Bach believed that art could enhance music’s natural beauty, in part by amending those flaws. By “practical,” I mean the ways in which beauty appears in the context of composition and performance. In this case, I am focused on two particular areas within Bach’s compositions: First, his usage of forms of the word “Schönheit,” the word used for beauty in the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate. Second, because of Bach’s theoretical interest in tonality (and its relationship to beauty), I will survey Bach’s usage of dissonance in his compositions. Taken together, I will show that these “practical” and “theoretical” lenses enable us to discern a coherent portrait of Bachian aesthetics.

In Chapter Two, I begin presenting the explanatory backdrop for Chapter One, which is the tradition of Lutheran aesthetics stemming from Luther himself. First, I present a condensed rendering of the theological aesthetics of Martin Luther himself. Against Lutheran theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann and Anders Nygren, I follow Mattes in his recent book Luther’s Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal. For three main reasons, I have chosen to organize this section theo-dramatically: First, the scattered fragments we possess of Bachian aesthetics strongly suggest that Bach associated “beauty” with “nature.” Therefore, if we want to understand what Bach thought about
beauty, we must also investigate his conception of nature, an idea rife with Theo-
dramatic import. Second, the Christian Bible itself has been organized Theo-dramatically,
such that it forms a narrative whole from Genesis (creation) to Revelation (eschaton).
Accordingly, narrative drama should frame any Christian theological account, and
Luther’s work stands out as an exemplar in this regard. His *Lectures on Genesis*, for
example, do not just focus on the Genesis account itself; they focus on the meaning of the
Genesis account for the entire biblical Theo-drama. Third, according to Luther, the
lynchpin that holds Genesis and Revelation together is the Word who becomes flesh in
the middle of that drama: Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ who makes the grand sweep of
Christian Theo-drama intelligible, and it is a major claim of this dissertation that in order
to understand Bachian aesthetics, one must also understand this theo-dramatic role of
Christology in Lutheran aesthetics. At the end of this chapter, I show that figures whose
works appear in Bach’s personal library, such as Johann Arndt and Johann Gerhard,
carried important elements of Luther’s aesthetics forward in time. This intervening stage
helps secure the line of aesthetic influence from Luther to Bach; Bach was interpreting a
live tradition of Lutheran theological aesthetics, not trying to revive a corpse that had
died with Luther.

In Chapter Three, I show that music fits rather neatly into the broader Theo-
dramatic framework laid out in Chapter Two. Luther lifted music to unprecedented
theological heights, but his exuberance did not come at the cost of incoherence. Even
though Luther never finished his intended musical treatise, his scattered musical
reflections cohere within his overarching Theo-dramatic system. In various places, Luther
claims that music is one of the most beautiful gifts of God, takes for granted that its
nature fell away from its divine perfection, and suggests that it plays a powerful aesthetic role in making Christ’s cosmic redemption more audible to listeners. In other words, music plays an important role in every stage of Luther’s Theo-dramatics. I close this chapter by showing that the tradition of Lutheran musical aesthetics was carried forward and developed by figures Bach was well aware of, such as Christoph Raupach, Johann Mattheson, Philipp Nicolai, and Andreas Werckmeister.

In Chapter Four, I re-read Chapter One in light of Chapters Two and Three in order to show that Bach was a sophisticated interpreter of Lutheran aesthetics who used music to make the beauty of Christ’s cosmic redemption more audible to his listeners. The first three chapters laid the groundwork for this chapter, and it represents the substantiation of my thesis. It unfolds in the following major sections: biographical evidence of Bach’s exposure to Lutheran theology (and particularly Christology), a rendering of Bachian aesthetics in Lutheran Theo-dramatic form, an account of Bachian aesthetics in historical perspective, and a critical evaluation of four scholarly accounts of the Bach-Luther relationship in light of this study.

In Chapter Five, I pivot from defending my thesis to considering its implications for the two arenas most directly relevant to this dissertation, to Bach, and to his understanding of beauty: the contemporary academy and the contemporary church. In particular, I argue that neither arena provides an entirely hospitable locale for Bach studies (and his understanding of beauty). In short, the contemporary academy has marginalized Lutheran theology as an authoritative explanatory factor in musicology; the contemporary church has largely marginalized academic musicology as an authoritative source in its liturgical life. Accordingly, studying Bach in either arena bumps up against
barriers that are alien to Bach’s own working life: for example, the contemporary academic idea that music could be abstracted from its metaphysical status as a beautiful gift of God, or the contemporary ecclesial idea that music should be as culturally relevant as possible and therefore reject musical features (such as dissonance) that are not immediately palatable to many listeners. I conclude the chapter and dissertation by lifting up several examples of Bachian beauty from contemporary culture, implying in the process that contemporary culture has been the most hospitable locale for understanding and appreciating Bachian beauty.

**Key Words/Terminology**

Throughout this dissertation, I will be using a handful of words that are fraught with conceptual ambiguity: “beauty,” “nature,” and “consonance/dissonance” especially. I do so not because I seek confusion, but because the figures animating this work (Luther and Bach in particular) used these words throughout their own work. Moreover, “beauty” and “nature,” and even “the beauty of nature,” are words/terms that can carry so much meaning that the effort to clarify them is worthwhile. Accordingly, let us take each in turn.

**Beauty**

Even before Socrates, human beings were philosophizing about beauty. For Pythagoras, the philosopher best known for his theory about right triangles and their
hypotenuses, objects whose proportions aligned with the golden ratio were the most beautiful. Accordingly, in the Pythagorean tradition, whole-number ratios came to represent beauty in music. Symmetry and proportion thus began to dominate ancient Greek aesthetic philosophy, with Greek architecture following Pythagoras’ lead and Socrates’ student Plato extending the Pythagorean tradition deeper into the realms of cosmology and ethics.

As Natalie Carnes narrates in her book *Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa*, the Pythagorean-Platonic approach to beauty held sway for centuries in the West, with Aristotle and eventually Plotinus retaining its broad outlines while transforming or detailing some of its more specific features. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, schooled as they were in Greek philosophy, attempted to baptize this tradition and render it suitable for Christian theology, thereby setting the stage for the aesthetic philosophies and theologies of the medieval period, which Carnes does not discuss. Her history of beauty moves swiftly from Augustine/Pseudo-Dionysius to modernity, without any mention of intervening figures.

Such a move, however, ignores the work of a figure who straddles the borderlines between “ancient,” “medieval,” and “modern” even more than Augustine: Martin Luther. As mentioned above, Carnes is hardly alone in assuming (or in other cases, claiming) that Luther did not give beauty a high position in his theology. Chapters Two and Three, however, will show that Luther developed a form of theological aesthetics that is both rigorously Christological and hospitable to ancient aesthetic thought. Luther lodges Platonic-Pythagorean philosophical aesthetics within his own doctrine of creation.

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16 Carnes, 17-18.
17 Ibid., 18.
through Christ, so that the presence of order in nature (shown, for example, in the proportions of the human body or a musical interval) reveals divine beauty.

Yet Luther goes far beyond Plato and Pythagoras theologically, since for him, nature has also fallen into disorder (rendering it less beautiful than its pre-lapsarian state). Human bodies are now less proportional, human souls are fraught with disordered desires, and musical nature has fallen into various forms dissonance. All of “fallen nature” needs divine assistance, and true ugliness, according to Luther, is human beings thinking that they are so intrinsically beautiful that they need nothing from God. True Beauty, on the other hand, comes through God’s gracious assistance to all of creation in the form of Jesus Christ, and human beings are most beautiful when they confess their sins, receive his grace, and share it with others.

It might seem, then, that there is an irreconcilable tension within Lutheran aesthetics: Luther affirms classical aesthetic criteria, like proportion, but they can also serve as springboards to self-justification. The most beautiful people in God’s eyes, one might argue along these lines, are those who can harmonize the best. God has already graced them with natural gifts, they then worked hard to cultivate those gifts, and now they rightly enjoy the benefits accrued from their industry. How could such people not consider themselves more beautiful than others in the eyes of God? That sort of attitude, however, is precisely what Luther wants to undercut, what he wants to call ugly. Can it really be claimed, then, that those who harmonize the best, or write music with the most orderly proportions, are acting beautifully according to Luther’s standards? Does it not make more sense to say, in Lutheran theological terms, that Bach is the ugliest of all composers?
By the end of this dissertation, I hope to show quite the opposite. Bach exhibited many signs of personal humility, and especially humility toward God. Following Luther, Bach often showed great respect for people in positions more powerful than his own, but also following Luther, he subjected everyone (himself included) to a thorough theological critique. Accordingly, Bach could praise Frederick the Great even while masterfully subverting his authority on a theological level. James Gaines describes Bach’s intentions in writing *Das Musikalische Opfer* well:

All of the oddities contained in the work—the harrowing descent in *galant* passages, the melancholy fate of the king’s fortune, the song to glory that goes nowhere, the German dedication, the Scriptural invocation to “seek and find” God’s mercy rather than the harsh, eternal judgment of God’s own canon law, the setting of a church sonata—all of these were of a piece, and this is what they say: Beware the appearance of good fortune, Frederick, stand in awe of a fate more fearful than any this world has to give, seek the glory that is beyond the glory of this fallen world, and know that there is a law higher than any king’s which is never changing and by which you and every one of us will be judged. Of course that is what he said. He had been saying it all his life.

If this seems a foolhardy message to have sent an absolute monarch and his son’s employer, it was entirely in keeping with past practice. Bach would no more have held back, trimmed, or censored his musical and theological beliefs for Frederick than he would have shrunk from telling the young Saxon prince, grandson of his king Augustus and the son of his elector, to choose Virtue over Vice. He did not hesitate to side against his own superior in Mühlhausen, or to tell the town fathers there that *God is My King*, or to defy repeatedly and roundly both the consistory of Arnstadt and the council of Leipzig. If he could press his patron-elector about a student prefect, what would he draw back from addressing with a monarch he did *not* like? He had nothing to be afraid of, or, more precisely, what he feared was far more powerful than any monarch.18

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The evidence to support Gaines’ claims is massive, though for our purposes here, Bach’s frequent cantata inscriptions of “Soli Deo Glória” and “Jesu, juva” should serve as a fitting encapsulation of Bach’s humble posture toward God.

According to Luther, such humility toward God is a sign of human beauty. When human beings realize that we are nothing without God, we begin to understand beauty. Yet in order to understand beauty fully, we must also understand that God chose to make us into something, and that God is committed to refashioning that “something” into a more beautiful form than it possesses in our current fallen state. That puts Christians – situated as we are between Christ’s resurrection and return – in a dramatic stage of hopeful expectation. Accordingly, Luther calls every Christian to express the beauty of Christ’s cosmic redemption to others so that they might, in turn, experience a hopeful foretaste of that heavenly beauty. Bach apparently took this call very seriously, and the character of his response forms the basis of Chapter Four.

One final note of clarification is in order: when I use the term “aesthetic” or “aesthetics,” I simply mean “things pertaining to beauty.” The term has been used in diverse and sometimes conflicting ways, and I am not endorsing or rejecting any of them in principle. I am using the term primarily because it has become such a commonly used term both inside and outside of academic circles (including in many of the sources I have used in this dissertation). I will be using the term both philosophically and theologically, and the context should make such usage clear.

Nature
“If we are to think about “nature” and “altering it,” Allen Verhey writes, “it would be good to know what we are thinking about, what “nature” is. But “nature” turns out to mean many different things.”19 The church has wrestled with this concept (and all its ambiguity) for practically its entire existence, from the Trinitarian and Christological debates at Nicaea and Chalcedon to Karl Barth’s famous rejection of “natural theology” and the analogy entis in his Church Dogmatics.20 In between these two temporal bookends stands the work of Luther and Bach, both of whom often used the word “nature” (Natur) to talk about God, human beings, and, of course, music. This is not the place to examine their work on “nature” in relation to early church councils or contemporary theological debates, but it is the place to clarify exactly what I perceive Luther and Bach to be doing when they use this word, and how I am using it in turn. Verhey offers sixteen senses of the word “nature,” some of which can be helpful in this task.

Verhey’s first sense, for example, is highly relevant to this dissertation: nature as “the kind of thing a thing is,” the “character of a thing.”21 By nature, a dog barks and a cat meows; by nature, plants grow toward light and not away from it. In the plant and animal kingdoms, the “natural character” of things can often be easily and clearly observed. But music? The “nature” of music seems far more ambiguous, especially because music is not an individuated “thing” the way a dog, cat, or plant is. Nevertheless, all sound possesses undeniable physical properties, and pitched sound presents a unique

20 “I regard the analogy entis as the invention of the Antichrist, and I believe that because of it it is impossible ever to become a Roman Catholic, all other reasons for not doing so being to my mind short-sighted and trivial.” Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 1.1, preface, xiii.
21 Verhey, 2.
subset of those properties. Those physical properties can rightly be considered part of “musical nature,” and no amount of human contrivance will change those physical facts. However, “musical nature” should not be reduced to those physical facts, since the significance and character of music exceeds merely physical description. Such is the realm of “musical metaphysics,” which deals with questions such as: “can we discern patterns of order and disorder within the physical properties of pitched sound?” and “can organizations of pitched sound represent visual images?” This will be an especially important category in Chapter Four.

Verhey’s second sense also proves useful here: nature as “everything.” Such a sense could understandably be considered vacuous, since “nature in this sense has no opposite.” But in the context of the universal claims of scripture, it is actually necessary. God created all things as good, and all things fell away from that perfect goodness. In this sense, the distinctions between “human nature,” “musical nature,” and “plant/animal nature” (among all the different types of “nature”) can all be subsumed under a single “natural” heading: created as perfectly good but now existing as “fallen” from that state.

A third sense, which is Verhey’s ninth of sixteen, helps us understand the Lutheran and Bachian distinction between “musical nature” and “musical art.” Verhey calls this the contrast between “nature” and “the interfered with.” To be sure, such a distinction can give rise to fictions about “pure nature,” as though, for example, the protection of a “wilderness area” could produce an environment untouched by human beings. Nevertheless, this distinction serves a useful purpose: it acknowledges that there

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 5.
are elements of “musical nature” that are scientific fact, which cannot be changed by human interference. Even the most sophisticated tuning system, for example, will never change the reality of the harmonic series. The harmonic series is musical nature; temperament is musical culture. As we will see, both Luther and Bach seemed to profoundly respect this sort of distinction.

Verhey’s final (sixteenth!) sense of “nature” is extremely relevant to this dissertation, though will also take us beyond its scope: “Christian theology has complicated things still more,” he writes, “distinguishing human ‘nature’ as created from our human ‘nature’ as fallen and by insisting that we can hardly make sense of human nature, of the sort of creature human beings are (nature #1) without attending both to God’s creation and to human sin.”

24 This is the core of Luther’s theology. Apart from God’s revelation in scripture, he constantly asserts, we “can hardly make sense of” human nature. Scripture, with Christ as its hermeneutical key, reveals to us what is good in nature (both human and non-human) and what is fallen and in need of redemption.

Accordingly, one of Verhey’s senses will not be helpful in this dissertation, as it attempts to efface the critical theological distinction made directly above: the “apotheosis” of nature. 25 This sense of “nature” elevates it to a divine status, whether as Marcus Aurelius’ elevation of “Nature” into the highest echelons of the pantheon, as the “Mother Nature” who exerts a mysterious but controlling force over observable phenomena, or as the quasi-divine “Nature” of Romanticism that purports to yield phenomenal access (often through “absolute music”) to noumenal reality. 26 In the context

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24 Ibid., 10.
25 Ibid., 4.
26 Ibid.
of Luther and Bach studies, such accounts ignore the fallen-ness of nature and its need (both human and non-human) for Christological redemption.

**Consonance/Dissonance**

The *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* defines “consonance” as follows:

Acoustically, the sympathetic vibration of sound waves of different frequencies related as the ratios of small whole numbers; psychologically, a harmonious sounding together of two or more notes, that is with an ‘absence of roughness’, ‘relief of tonal tension’ or the like. Dissonance is then the antonym to consonance with corresponding criteria of ‘roughness’ or ‘tonal tension’, and the consonance-dissonance dimension admits of degrees of relative consonance based on either criterion. The ‘roughness’ criterion, however, implies a psychoacoustic judgment, whereas the notion of ‘relief of tonal tension’ depends upon a familiarity with the ‘language’ of Western tonal harmony. There is a further psychological use of the term to denote aesthetic preferences, the criterion generally used being ‘pleasantness’ or ‘unpleasantness.’

From this definition alone, one can see why, according to Paul Hindemith, “the two concepts have never been completely explained, and for a thousand years the definitions have varied.” In this dissertation, I am taking this conceptual ambiguity seriously, while taking Bach’s obvious interest in this musical dynamic seriously as well. Accordingly, I have chosen to chart some sort of middle path between tonal agnosticism (a position which would claim that, because of historical and cultural differences, the terms “consonance” and “dissonance” are too conceptually diffuse to be applied across time

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and place) and strict, trans-cultural and trans-historical, definitions of tonality (a position which would attempt to align all cultures of all times and places with a single tonal system). The harmonic series, like all mathematical realities, does not change based on time, place, or culture. How people of various times, places, and cultures actually hear and describe music, however, does change – and often in striking ways.

Therefore, in my “tonal methodology,” I am adhering to the most obvious ends of the consonance/dissonance spectrum. I will be assuming that Bach considered diatonic notes within a notated key to be consonant, and within smaller intervallic units, unisons/octaves, major triads, and perfect fourths and fifths will also be included. Dissonances will include chromatic deviations from the expected diatonicism of a notated key, but will mainly focus on the intervals of a minor-second (“half-step”) or an augmented-fourth/diminished-fifth (“tritone”). These latter forms of dissonance are the most extreme, evidenced in this context by the baroque appellation of the tritone as “the devil’s interval” and, more broadly, the use of the minor-second as a sign of impending doom (most famously in the movie “Jaws”). I also include forms of chromaticism in my definition of “dissonance” because they represent a disruption of the diatonic framework laid out by the notated key. Such “chromatic disruptions” of expected diatonicism often generate much subtler dissonances than half-steps/tritones, and offer a way of understanding Bach’s tonality gradient without needing to delve into the extraordinarily complex debates about the history of tonality.

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29 By “most extreme,” I mean that whereas other intervals have crossed the borderline between consonance and dissonance (such as the major/minor-third from the medieval period to the common practice period), the minor-second and augmented-fourth/diminished-fifth have almost always, if not always, been considered dissonances.
Chapter 1: Bachian Aesthetics in Theoretical and Practical Perspective

“Bach was concerned not with the abstract confirmation of theories, but instead with the skillful practical implementation thereof.”\(^{30}\)

- Christoph Wolff

“Christ’s suffering is the fulfillment of Scripture and the accomplishment of the redemption of the human race.”\(^{31}\)

- Martin Luther’s commentary on John 19:30, underlined by Bach in his *Calov Bible*

1.1.1) Introduction

Despite all of his astounding musical eloquence, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) was no German prose stylist. “He did not care to write about himself,” the editors of *The New Bach Reader* put it, nor did he write much, if anything, “concerning the aesthetic speculations or controversies of the time.”\(^{32}\) In *The New Bach Reader*, for example, we mainly find institutional documents and almost nothing in the way of artistic

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or aesthetic treatises. Bach apparently even had so little interest in theoretical matters that it took his former student, Lorenz Christoph Mizler, almost a decade to convince him to join his Society of Musical Science.\(^3^3\) And when Bach did write about these subjects, it was typically in the context of practical music making, like his “Some Most Necessary Rules of Thorough Bass by J.S.B.”\(^3^4\) Overall, when we look at the shape of Bach’s life and work, we get the impression of a voracious learner who expressed his knowledge not in theoretical treatises but in works of musical art. Bach’s “maxim,” as Christoph Wolff put it, was “praxis cum theoria.”\(^3^5\) It might seem, then, that because of this paucity of information about Bach’s own artistic theory, the task of developing a conception of “Bachian aesthetics” is difficult, if not hopeless. Indeed, we get a sense of that difficulty when we consider that the most substantive treatment of Bachian aesthetics to date, Andre Pirro’s 1907 *L’esthétique de Jean-Sébastien Bach*, is largely made up of Pirro’s own musicological judgments.\(^3^6\)

Bach *did*, however, possess “a definite artistic creed,”\(^3^7\) and he did care to articulate a defense of his artistic understanding when under attack by someone like Johann Adolph Scheibe (1708-1776). Thus we do know what he considered “the essential aims of true art” to be, and we also know that one word (and its cognates) features prominently in that description: “Schönheit,” or beauty. We can also discern, as this

\(^3^4\) *NBR*, 206.
\(^3^5\) “Thus his governing maxim could more properly be expressed as “praxis cum theoria”—Leibniz reversed.” Wolff, *Bach’s Musical Universe*, 334.
\(^3^6\) André Pirro, *L’esthétique de Jean-Sébastien Bach* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1907). Pirro does not ignore the extant documentation we have concerning Bachian aesthetics (such as the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate), but the overwhelming majority of the book is a detailed exploration of Bach’s music itself.
\(^3^7\) *NBR*, 16.
chapter will show, that some of Bach’s other writings (such as the thorough bass rules mentioned above) fit neatly into the schema presented by Johann Abraham Birnbaum (1702-1748) in his defense of Bach against Scheibe. Taken together, these documents suggest that a theoretical perspective on Bachian aesthetics is possible, but that there is not enough material to warrant a full chapter in its own right.

There is more than enough material for a full chapter, however, when we look at Bach’s aesthetics from another perspective: the practice of music-making. If it is true that Bach did not concern himself much with theoretical matters, it is also true that he concerned himself greatly with practical musical matters. Although Bach should not be considered the most prolific composer in western musical history (his own friend Georg Philipp Telemann outranks him in that regard), no other composer wrote so much extraordinary music over such a long period without also suffering periods of serious decline or inactivity. His hundreds of sacred cantatas, for example, are so intellectually powerful that a Bach scholar can write a six-hundred-page monograph on a single one of them. And as we will see in the course of this study, variants of the word “Schönheit” appear in his vocal music dozens of times. Bach may not have written that much about beauty in theory, but, as we shall see, he has shown himself to be a serious aesthetician in practice.

The first major claim of this essay, which will be necessary in order to defend my overarching claim about the aesthetic influence of Martin Luther (1483-1546) on Bach, is that these theoretical and practical lenses cohere to form an identifiable conception of “Bachian aesthetics.” To put it another way, I will show that when we read Birnbaum’s

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theoretical statements about the relationship between art, nature, and beauty, there are good reasons for believing that we are reading an account of the convictions (whether conscious and unconscious) that would have shaped Bach’s compositional practice. We are receiving the outlines of what Wolff calls Bach’s “definite artistic creed” that governed his musical practice. In particular, this chapter will show that Bach believed music to be both intrinsically beautiful and flawed, that musical dissonance is one of those flaws, and that musical art can render musical nature more beautiful by amending them. I will also suggest that there is an undeniably theological dimension to this aesthetic conception, both in its theoretical and practical dimensions. It will then be the task of later chapters to make this theological dimension more explicit and explore its primary intellectual antecedents.

1.1.2) Bachian Aesthetics in Theoretical Perspective

When Johann Adolph Scheibe launched his attack on Bach’s musical credibility, he set the terms of the debate.\textsuperscript{39} “This great man would be the admiration of whole

\textsuperscript{39} Due to Bach’s obvious musical brilliance, many (if not most) commentators on this debate have sought to discredit Scheibe’s position in order to defend Birnbaum/Bach. In his essay “In Defence of J. A. Scheibe Against J. S. Bach,” however, George Buelow makes a somewhat convincing case that Scheibe was not really intending to attack or insult Bach. He was trying to point out stylistic differences between Bach and his contemporaries, and, accordingly, was trying to show Bach how his music could be more widely embraced (how it could become “the admiration of whole nations). Buelow thinks, understandably, that Scheibe was shocked at Birnbaum’s rather stern response. What this suggests, however, is that Birnbaum and Bach reacted so strongly because they cared deeply about the conceptual configuration of nature/art/beauty in Scheibe’s original attack. Birnbaum and Bach likely did not care that much about Bach’s music becoming the admiration of nations; they cared about the implied insult of Bach being labelled as a Musikant and, more importantly, about Scheibe’s characterization of Bach’s art. George
nations,” he writes, “if he had more amenity, if he did not take away the natural element in his pieces by giving them a turgid and confused style, and if he did not darken their beauty by an excess of art.”40 One could certainly understand if Bach and Birnbaum wanted to change the terms of the debate, but it appears that they found “nature, art, and beauty” to be important categories worth retaining. They just wanted to redefine them and their interrelationships. For example, Birnbaum takes Scheibe’s terms and simply reconfigures them in order to articulate “the essential aims of true art”:

The essential aims of true art are to imitate nature (die natur nachahmet) and, where necessary, to aid it. If art imitates nature, then indisputably the natural element must everywhere shine through (hervorleuchten) in works of art. Accordingly it is impossible that art should take away the natural element from those things in which it imitates nature—including music. If art aids nature, then its aim is to preserve it, and to improve its condition; certainly not to destroy it. Many things are delivered to us by nature in the most misshapen (ungestalt) states, which, however, acquire the most beautiful appearance (schönst ansehen) when they have been formed by art. Thus art lends nature a beauty it lacks, and increases the beauty it possesses. Now, the greater the art is—that is, the more industriously and painstakingly it works at the improvement (ausbeßerung) of nature—the more brilliantly shines (vollkommener glänzt) the beauty thus brought

J. Buelow, “In Defence of J. A. Scheibe against J. S. Bach.” Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association 101 (1974): 85-100. Michael Maul, using discoveries made about the identities of others Scheibe criticized in his journal, confirms that the debate impacted Bach significantly: “The Scheibe-Birnbaum dispute has long been recognized as an important document in the early reception of Bach’s music, but before the discovery of the Sendschreiben with Walther’s annotations its context remained mysterious. This new knowledge about the identities of the other criticized persons, the accompanying circumstances of the debate, and its distant battlefields make it clear that the Bach-Scheibe dispute had a much more powerful effect on Bach’s life than has hitherto been recognized.” (143) Michael Maul, “Bach versus Scheibe: Hitherto Unknown Battlegrounds in a Famous Conflict,” In Bach Perspectives, Volume 9: J. S. Bach and His Contemporaries in Germany, Andrew Talle, ed. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013) 120-44. For further and more recent documentation on the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate, see: Beverly Jerold, “The Bach-Scheibe Controversy: New Documentation,” Bach 42, no. 1 (2011): 1-45.

40 NBR, 338.
into being. Accordingly it is impossible that the greatest art should darken
the beauty of a thing.\textsuperscript{41}

Scheibe and Birnbaum do not disagree about whether or not music is beautiful by nature;
both sides simply assume it is beautiful to one extent or another. The argument is about
the impact of musical art on nature, and whether it diminishes or augments that natural
beauty. For Scheibe, music is most beautiful when it is \textit{galant}, when it simply imitates
something natural like birdsong: it is simple, melodic, and pleasing to the ear. For
Birnbaum, and thus presumably also for Bach, a simple melody is only the beginning of
the artistic process, a mere inkling of the richer beauty that exists \textit{within} nature that an
artist can uncover and display in sound. Birnbaum even makes explicit reference to the
supreme beauty of Bachian polyphony in the debate.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{NBR}, 345. Because of the importance of this passage, especially as it relates to the
word “\textit{Schönheit},” it is worth quoting the full German text here:
\begin{quote}
\textit{Die wesentlichen beschäftigungen wahrer kunst sind, daß sie die natur nachahmet, und
ihr, wo es nöthig ist, hilfft. Ahmt die kunst der natur nach; so muß ohnstreitig unter den
wercken der kunst, das natürliche allenthalben hervorleuchten. Folglich ist es unmöglich,
däß die kunst denen dingen, bey welchen sie die natur nachahmet, und also auch der
Music das natürliche entziehen könne. Hilfft die kunst der natur, so geht ihre absicht nur
dahin, sie zu erhalten, ja so gar in bessern stand zu setzen, nicht aber zu zernichten. Viel
dinge Werden von der natur höchst ungestalt geliefert, welche das schönste ansehn
erhalten, wenn sie die kunst gebildet hat. Also schenckt die kunst der natur die
ermangelnde schönheit, und vermehrt die gegenwärtige. Je gröser nun die kunst ist, das
ist, je fleißiger und sorgfältiger sie an der ausbeßerung der natur arbeitet, desto
vollkommener glänzt die dadurch hervorgebrachte schönheit. Folglich ist es wiederum
unmöglich, daß die allergröste kunst die schönheit eines dinges verdunkeln könne. Sollte
es also wohl möglich seyn, daß der Herr Hof-Compositeur, auch durch die größte kunst,
die er bey ausarbeitung seiner musicalischen stücke anwendet, ihnen das natürliche
entziehen, und ihre schönheit verdunkeln könne?” Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim
Schulze, eds., \textit{Fremdschriftliche und gedruckte Dokumente zur Lebensgeschichte Johann
409.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} “It is certain, by the way, that the voices in the works of this great master of music
work wonderfully in and about one another, but without the slightest confusion. They
move along together or in opposition, as necessary. They part company, and yet all meet
Bach’s Invention No. 1 in C Major, so brilliantly analyzed by Laurence Dreyfus in *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*, offers a concise example of such a process. In the terms of the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate, the seven-note melody that opens the piece is at least somewhat beautiful in its undeveloped form. Yet after Bach’s ‘industrious’ and ‘painstaking’ labor undertaken to ‘spin forth’ (*fortspinnung*) its possible variations (inversions, augmentations, modulations, etc…) and arrange them in artistic form, the beauty of the original melody now ‘shines throughout’ all the more ‘brilliantly.’ Or we might consider the fecundity of invention on display in the *Goldberg Variations*, described in glowing theological terms by David Bentley Hart. Bach seems to have operated under the presumption that latent in any single melody are forms of hidden beauty awaiting discovery and artistic elaboration. Scheibe, on the other hand, seems to have believed that such a process of discovery and elaboration only obscures the natural beauty of a melody.

It might seem, then, as though the terms of this aesthetic debate were rather straightforward: one side defending the beauty of musical complexity, the other the beauty of musical simplicity. Yet it was not just the alleged turgidity or confusion of...
Bach’s developed polyphony that bothered Scheibe so much; it was its lack of “amenity,” which Birnbaum describes as “melody without dissonance.” For Scheibe, even more than tying up a beautiful string into a knot, Bach had allegedly tied it up into a dark and unpleasant knot. On what grounds, Scheibe seems to be asking, could someone possibly consider dark, dissonant music beautiful?

Birnbaum defends Bach by appealing to that most important and slippery of categories: the “demands of nature.” He argues that nature is not perfectly beautiful on its own; something is askew. ‘Many things are delivered to us by nature in the most misshapen states,’ he writes. ‘Misshapen’ is the typical translation here, but Birnbaum did not use the word “missgestaltet.” The German word he did use, “ungestalt,” carries a much richer array of meanings than one English word can provide because of the semantic broadness of the negative prefix “un.” The word “Gestalt” itself suggests a sense of formal wholeness, a sense that later psychologists would use to distinguish the perception of an object’s wholeness from its disparate parts. That which is “ungestalt,” on the other hand, lacks wholeness in its form; it craves resolution.

\[46\] NBR, 343. The word “Annehmlichkeit,” usually translated as “amenity,” breaks down as “take-in-ish-ness.” This word grouping suggests that “amenity” is closely related to an object’s beauty, its attractiveness, its ability to bring the listener into its own orbit of meaning. To be sure, Scheibe rejected Birnbaum’s characterization (of amenity as “melody without dissonance”) in their later correspondence. For the purposes of this dissertation however, what matters is that Birnbaum and Bach thought that Scheibe was trying to remove dissonance from his definition of musical amenity/beauty, and that must have bothered them significantly.

\[47\] Ibid., 345.

\[48\] The entry for “Gestalt” in Friedrich Kluge, An Etymological Dictionary of the German Language, trans. John Francis Davis (G. Bell: New York 1891), 117, links its adjectival form of “having form or shape” to the Old High German word “ungistalt” meaning “disfigured, ugly.” In the context of Birnbaum’s usage, this etymology suggests that one could reasonably interpret him as saying that “nature delivers things to us in the most ugly/disfigured states” and that it is the duty of the artist to beautify them using art.
terms, nature delivers many things to us in unresolved, dissonant states and it is up to the artist to resolve them beautifully in artistic form.

Birnbaum details this position further in his discussion of music’s “amenity,” where he more clearly articulates the role of art in transforming those misshapen states. The amenity of music does not consist simply in consonance, he argues, but “in the connection and alternation of consonances and dissonances without hurt to the harmony.” 49 When a composer “sees to this alternation” and knows “how to introduce a dissonance skillfully and resolve it adroitly,” then how “poignantly pleasing his harmony is.” 50 Music is most pleasant when it includes dissonance, both because Scheibe’s “insipid little ditties” bore the listener rather quickly and because dissonance allows for the expression of the dark passions of the human soul. For Birnbaum and Bach, music is most faithful to nature through a connection and alternation of consonance and dissonance in which dissonance is finally resolved. 51

Birnbaum has opened up a fascinating aesthetic category here: what we might call “dark beauty,” or beauty that contains dissonance. Whereas Scheibe argued that Bach “darkened the beauty of his works with an excess of art,” 52 Birnbaum seems to be arguing the inverse: true art reveals hidden beauty in even the darkest, most dissonant, places of nature. True art shines brilliant light on nature’s most misshapen states by resolving them, allowing them to be perceived as whole and genuinely beautiful. 53 So at this point, it must be asked: in musico-theoretical terms, what do Birnbaum and Bach mean by

49 NBR, 343.
50 Ibid., italics added.
51 “The various Passions, especially the dark ones, cannot be expressed with fidelity to Nature without this alternation.” NBR, 343.
52 Ibid., 338.
53 Ibid., 343.
dissonance and misshapenness? And can we discern an implicit conception of dissonance in Bach’s work?

1.1.3) Consonance, Dissonance and Musical Numbers

In order to answer these important questions, the complex issue of Bach’s numerology cannot be avoided. And while Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach reported that his father was no fan of “dry mathematical stuff” and explorations into Bach’s alleged “number alphabet” and secret numerical encodings have yielded limited insights and plenty of unhelpful speculation, no one can deny that music is a numerically conditioned reality and that Bach himself considered music a “a mixed mathematical science that concerns the origins, attributes, and distinctions of sound.” Bach did care about the numerical basis of music, but particularly as it relates to the concept of divinely created order or the potential of music’s mathematical qualities to move human beings to “devotion, virtue, joy, and sorrow.”

Take, for example, Bach’s own understanding of the figured bass (or sometimes the “thorough bass) and its relation to other scale degrees. “The figured bass is the most perfect foundation of music,” he says. “It is executed with both hands: the left hand

54 Ibid., 398. The emphasis here should be on “dry” rather than “mathematical.”
56 Johann Rudolph Ahle and Johann Georg Ahle, eds., Kurze doch deutliche Anleitung zu der lieblich-und lüblichen Singekunst (Mühlhausen: Pauli, 1690). See Wolff, Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician, 102, no. 57, for example. See also John Butt, Music Education and the Art of Performance in the German Baroque (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 37.
57 Ibid.
playing the prescribed notes and the right joining consonances and dissonances, in such a
way that the whole produces a pleasing harmony in honor of God and for the legitimate
delight of the soul.”58 Again, just as in Birnbaum’s articulation, we see that consonances
and dissonances work together to produce a ‘pleasing whole.’ The natural consonances,
we learn from Bach’s “Some Most Necessary Rules of Thorough Bass by J.S.B.,” consist
of the third, fifth, and octave of the bass.59 The other scale degrees apparently do not
partake in the same degree of natural order as the third, fifth and octave. They are, we
might say, naturally misshapen with regard to the fundamental bass. The minor-second,
the augmented-fourth, the diminished-seventh – we could go on – are considered
naturally dissonant because they crave the resolution provided by consonant intervals
such as the perfect fifth and octave.

In the terms of the Pythagorean music theory tradition that we know Bach read
about and which still reigned in his day to some degree,60 consonant intervals like the
unison/octave and the perfect fifth aligned with whole number ratios like 1:1, 2:1, and
3:2. Moreover, whether in their early Platonic-Pythagorean Greek form, or its later
Augustinian and Boethian Christian form, these whole-number consonances have been
viewed as signs of divine order and beauty in nature.61

58 NBR, 16-17.
59 Ibid., 206.
60 Tatlow, Bach’s Numbers: Compositional Proportion and Significance, 73.
61 Take, for example, the ways in which Augustine extends classical Greek musicology
into the realm of social, political, and theological order in various places of De Civitate
Dei. See especially: “Now what musicians call harmony in singing corresponds to
concord in a city,” (Chapter 2, Paragraph 21) and “Now David was a man skilled in song,
who loved the harmony of music not for vulgar pleasure but with a faithful will, and with
that will he served his God, who is the true God, by mystically prefiguring a great thing.
For the rational and measured arrangement of diverse sounds gives us an intimation of
Ruth Tatlow, in her book *Bach’s Numbers*, has recently attempted to avoid the mistakes of earlier explorations into Bachian numerology while also proposing to explain some of its theological significance. She claims that Bach went to great lengths to organize his music in accordance with the whole number ratios mentioned above, calling Bach’s ideal “proportional parallelism.” She argues that if Bach could make small adjustments – like adding or removing a few measures to a work – to arrive at ratios like 1:1 or 2:1, he would try to do so. Tatlow then marshals plenty of evidence to support her further theological claim that he attempted “proportional parallelism” because he associated these ratios with the presence of divine order in musical nature.

Although a direct association between whole number ratios and musical consonance/dissonance may now need qualification in light of empirical studies and our awareness of the so-called “Pythagorean comma,” such recent studies are immaterial to the question of what Bach intended to do in his own musico-theological context, working with the conceptual resources available to him. The focus of this essay is not on the ontological status of dissonance; rather, it is on what Bach is likely to have believed concerning dissonance in music, given his intellectual milieu and theoretical influences, and (as we shall see) his actual compositional practice.

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62 Tatlow situates her project in the history of Bach scholarship like this: “Although much of great significance has been published about Bach’s faith and Lutheran music, little has been written about the theological and practical significance of proportions, the unity and Harmony.” Tatlow, *Bach’s Numbers: Compositional Proportion and Significance*, 73.

63 Ibid., Chapter 1.

64 In Pythagorean tuning, the “comma” describes a small interval between two notes written enharmonically (for example, A-sharp and B-flat). In “pure” Pythagorean tuning, these notes should be identical, and because they are not, some form of temperament is required.
This brief foray into Bach’s numerology raises a critical question at the very heart of this study: if Bach believed that perfect consonances reflect divine order and beauty along the lines of the Pythagorean tradition, then why does dissonance play such a prominent role — even an aesthetic role — in the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate and Bach’s other theoretical articulations about music? In order to answer this question adequately, we must analyze how Bach treats certain themes from the debate in his practical music-making, with “nature,” “beauty,” and “dissonance” being chief among them.

1.2.1) Bachian Aesthetics in Practical Perspective

In the first section of this chapter, I arrived at a theoretical conception of Bach’s aesthetics by examining documents written by him and those close to him. In this section of the chapter, I will shift from an analysis of Bach’s aesthetics from a theoretical perspective to an analysis of it from a practical perspective. In other words, this section pivots from examining what we can glean of his approach to musical beauty from written sources, to how Bach practices and exemplifies the discovery and elaboration of beauty in his practical musical composition. First, I will show that Bach set variants of the words “Natur” and “Schönheit” to music throughout his vocal oeuvre, and almost always in a highly Christological context. Then, I will examine the way Bach actually “connects and alternates consonance and dissonance,” in his vocal work.

This shift to a practical perspective furthers my argument in two key ways: First, it will show that there are good reasons to suppose that Bach was consistent, that there is a genuine congruence between what it is likely he thought and believed about musical
beauty and what he enacts in his music. We read, for example, Birnbaum’s claim that an artist should alternate consonances and dissonances to produce a pleasing whole, or that artistic form can beautify even the most misshapen states of nature; this section explains how this theoretical conception makes sense in the practical context of the musical work Bach actually produced. Second, shifting the focus from the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate to Bach’s musical oeuvre (especially the vocal music) involves a concomitant shift from the seemingly philosophical to the explicitly theological. While it could be (and has been) argued that a transcendent “God” has dissolved into the immanent terms of the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate, Bach’s vocal music exhibits a highly developed understanding of Christology. In many places in the Passion oratorios and cantatas, Bach’s alternation of consonance and dissonance tracks very strikingly along the lines of the unfolding Christological drama. In other words, Bach’s use of tonal contrast indicates a sophisticated awareness of the theological dimensions of Christ’s crucifixion. He tends to use consonance when the text focuses on the divine nature of Christ, dissonance when it focuses on his human pain and suffering. And in the terms of the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate, this sort of “alternation” or “artistic forming of dissonance” is somehow beautiful. I will be suggesting, then, that Christology provides the implicit but overarching understanding of beauty at play in the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate, and it is in chapters two and three that will explain more precisely how this conception was furnished by the aesthetic thought of Martin Luther and many of his followers.

1.2.2) “Beauty/Schönheit” in the Musical Work of Bach

While the majority of this part of the chapter will focus on the ways in which Bach set the word “Schönheit” and its cognates to music, we should also note a few occasions when he encountered or expressed this word in the course of his musical life. For example, his uncle Johann Christoph, whom he called “the profound composer,” wrote a setting of Luther’s translation of Song of Songs 4: “Meine Freundin, du bist schön.” As a youth, Bach travelled to Hamburg to learn from the organist Johann Adam Reincken of St. Catherine’s Church. In his Musica Mechanica Organoedi, Jakob Adlung reports that Bach “could not find enough praise” for “the beauty and variety of timbre” of the organ there. Also as a youth, Bach trekked over two hundred miles on foot to “learn one thing or another” from Dietrich Buxtehude in Lübeck, grossly overstaying his leave from Arnstadt in the process. There, among the texts he would have likely studied, were BuxWV 19, “Drei schöne Dinge sind,” BuxWV 63, “O Jesulein, du Tausendschön,” and “Membra Jesu Nostri,” which repeatedly refers to the beauty of Christ in Latin (a language Bach knew well by that time). Finally, a report on Bach’s encounter with Frederick the Great reads that Bach considered Frederick’s melody to be “exceedingly beautiful” and undertook a vigorous project to “work it out completely.” These are just snippets of aesthetic activity, however, so let us now survey the role of the word Schönheit in his practical musical work more fully.

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66 Jakob Adlung, Musica Mechanica Organoedi (Berlin: Bernstiel, 1768), 187. Adlung even uses the word “Schönheit” specifically.
67 “Mr. Bach found the theme propounded to him so exceedingly beautiful that he intends to set it down on paper as a regular fugue and have it engraved on copper.” Report in the Spenerische Zeitung, Berlin, May 11, 1747, in NBR, 224.
1.2.3) “Schönheit” in the Passion Oratorios

The word “Schönheit” appears three times in the libretto of the St. Matthew Passion and once in the St. John Passion, and, as one might expect, it is used in reference to the Christological drama unfolding in the narrative. At the outset of Part Two of the St. Matthew Passion (No. 30), for example, the alto soloist sings of her longing for the departed Jesus and on this account the chorus calls her “du schönste unter Weibern.” Later, after the soldiers of the governor physically abuse Jesus, Bach interjects a famous chorale text from the Lutheran hymnist Paul Gerhardt, “O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden,” (No. 54) which describes the physical beauty that Christ sacrificed on the cross (O Haupt, sonst schön gezieret). Finally, after Pilate gives the body of Jesus to Joseph of Arimathea, Bach inserts a recitative (No. 64) that calls the overcoming of “Adams Fallen” by the “Heiland” a “schöne Zeit.” The text then specifies the nature of that beautiful time: renewed peace with God through the completion of Christ’s cross (Der Friedensschluß ist nun mit Gott gemacht // Denn Jesus hat sein Kreuz vollbracht). In the St. John Passion, the word “Schönheit” appears once, in the tenor aria “Erwäge,” and in its superlative form: “der allerschönste Regenbogen.” The juxtaposition of Christ’s bloodstained back with “the most beautiful rainbow” might, according to John Butt, “initially seem absurd.” Yet as Bettina Varwig shows, this connection would have made sense to Bach’s worshipping congregation:

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68 Butt, Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 82.
The idea of the rainbow would have been a familiar and evocative symbol for eighteenth-century Protestant bible readers and churchgoers. In the first Book of Moses, a rainbow appears to Noah after the Flood as a sign of the new covenant between God and man, a scene that is illustrated with a woodcut in Martin Luther’s Bible of 1534, as well as many later editions. In a version from 1705, Noah is shown burning a sacrificial animal as the waters recede, framed by the symbolic arch. Elsewhere, the rainbow was connected with ideas of death and the Final Judgement, when Jesus would appear sitting on a ‘golden rainbow’. When the tenor in the John Passion sings of Jesus’s wounds as resembling a rainbow, then, the words potentially carried a host of powerful associations - of Jesus’s own impending demise, of mankind’s sins that caused his martyrdom, of the forgiveness achieved through it, and of the approaching Second Coming - that would have seemed eminently sensible to a Bachian congregation. In dwelling on the vision of the violated body, the metaphor brings home the painful reality of this moment in the narrative, while at the same time heightening and beautifying that reality by enveloping it in a layer of redemptive symbolism.69

What Varwig’s analysis helps us see, and what will become increasingly apparent as this essay unfolds, is that in Bach’s vocal music, the word “Schönheit” functions to render the ugly aspects of Jesus’ crucifixion (blood-stained back, in the case of this aria) beautiful by ‘enveloping it in a layer of redemptive symbolism.’ Indeed, as we explore the sacred cantatas, we find many more examples of such.

1.2.4) “Schönheit” in the Sacred Cantatas

Throughout his sacred cantatas, Bach repeatedly uses texts that include the word “Schönheit” to describe Christ’s redemption of the cosmos. While both textual sources

and musical settings shift from one example to the next, a Christological focus on this word remains consistent throughout.

For example, the very first cantata text in the *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis*, “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern,” comes from the Lutheran poet, pastor, and composer Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608). In it, Nicolai integrates the aesthetic language of Psalm 45 with Christ’s self-identification as the morning star in Revelation 22:16 to develop a poetic description of Christ’s beauty as both creator and eschatological redeemer of all things (the “A und O // der Anfang und das Ende” in Nicolai’s text). Bach seems to have picked up on the musical potential of this aesthetic image, vividly depicting the shining of the morning star with a series of violin melismas. Bach even gives the word “Schönheit” explicit melismatic treatment later in the chorus, when the text refers to Christ as “schön und herrlich.” The final two lines of the cantata (*Komm, du schöne Freudenkrone, bleib nicht lange // Deiner wart ich mit Verlangen*) refer to the beauty of Christ’s crucifixion explicitly (*du schöne Freudenkrone*, “you beautiful crown of joy) and Bach even adds it to the end of one of his settings of Luther’s famous incarnation hymn: “*Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*” (BWV 61). In so doing, Bach suggests to the listener that the beauty of Christ’s incarnation will be ultimately revealed on the cross, when he receives the “*Freudenkrone*” that every believer should likewise seek.

In BWV 36 and 49, Bach uses a text in which the word “Schönheit” describes a relationship central to both Christian scripture and his vocal music more broadly: Christ as bridegroom and the human soul as bride. In BWV 36, for example, Bach links Christ’s universal redemptive role as “savior of the nations” (*der Heiden Heiland*) to his more intimate aesthetic one as “my wondrously beautiful bridegroom” (*dem wunderschönen*
In BWV 49, Bach’s chosen text – which he may have even helped produce – seems to indicate that the beauty of Christ can even render the soul itself beautiful. Christ calls the soul his most beautiful bride (schönste Braut) in the first two movements, only for the soul to respond, apparently in the throes of aesthetic ecstasy: “I am glorious, I am beautiful” (Ich bin herrlich, ich bin schön). She then sings that her sensual beauty (Schmuck und Ehrenkleid,) is directly attributable to Christ’s redemption (Seines Heils Gerechtigkeit). The cantata closes with another use of Nicolai’s “Wie schön” text, now set as a response of the soul to Christ when he announces that he is knocking at the door (Ich stehe vor der Tür followed by Komm, du schöne Freudenkrone, bleib nicht lange). Here, not only is the crown of Christ beautiful; the soul can become beautiful by longing for it. Indeed, in the fourth movement of BWV 82, “Ich habe genug,” Bach makes this connection explicit: the bass soloist urgently longs for that beautiful time when he can say goodbye to the world and rest in his savior’s lap (Wann kommt das schöne: Nun!).

In BWV 42, “Am Abend aber desselbigen Sabbats,” the text refers to Christ’s protection of the persecuted church as “a beautiful example” (ein schön Exempel). The cantata opens with a direct iteration of the text of John 20:19, wherein Jesus’ coming presence provides hope for the persecuted and pent-up disciples. In the fifth movement, Christoph Birkmann, one of Bach’s students, wrote the majority of the text of BWV 49, including the aria “Ich bin herrlich, ich bin schön.” Bach’s teaching influence on Birkmann, together with Bach’s decision to use this text (and at least the text of BWV 56, if not also BWV 82), suggests that Bach played a formative role in the production of aesthetic texts. Christine Blanken argues that the triangulated relationship of Bach-Birnbaum-Birkmann in Leipzig was a remarkably fruitful one, and that Birkmann’s “importance for J.S. Bach far exceeded that of a mere delivery-man for poetic texts.” See: Christine Blanken, “A Cantata-Text Cycle of 1728 from Nuremberg: a Preliminary Report on a Discovery relating to J. S. Bach’s so-called ‘Third Annual Cantata Cycle,’” Understanding Bach 10, 9–30.
where the word “Schönheit” appears, this biblical event is glossed as a beautiful example that can comfort the disciples and quell the devil’s power (Drum laßt die Feinde wüten!). This gloss suggests that Bach considered Christ’s redemptive activity, as laid out in scripture, to be beautiful.

In several places in the sacred cantatas, Bach uses the word “Schönheit” to describe places Christ leads the believer. In the fourth and fifth movements of BWV 151, for example, Christ leads the believer to a beautiful and blessed paradise (Heut schleußt er wieder auf die Tür // Zum schönen Paradeis) through his humiliation on the cross (Und durch dein Niedrigsein // Das Licht der Seligkeit zuwege bracht.) In the third movement of BWV 85 and the sixth movement of BWV 104, Bach uses Cornelius Becker’s gloss on Psalm 23, which makes the aesthetic dimension of Christ’s shepherding role explicit (Zur Weid er mich, sein Schäflein, führt // Auf schöner grünen Aue). In each case, allusions to the crucifixion surround Becker’s text, suggesting that Christ’s redemptive death opens up these aesthetic destinations for the believer (BWV 104, movement 5: “Hier schmeckt ihr Jesu Güte schon // Und hoffet noch des Glaubens Lohn // Nach einem sanften Todesschlafe” and BWV 85, movement 2: “Jesus ist ein guter Hirt // Denn er hat bereits sein Leben // Für die Schafe hingegeben.) Moreover, in the second movement of BWV 157, the text connects the idea of holding tightly to Jesus with going to the beautiful place called Heaven (Ja, ja, ich halte Jesum feste // So geh ich auch zum Himmel ein // O schöner Ort!). Yet again, right next to this text we find allusions to Christ’s crucifixion (Komm, sanfter Tod, und führ mich fort // Wo Gott und seines Lammes Gäste // In Kronen zu der Hochzeit sein.)

Elsewhere in the sacred cantatas, Bach uses the word “Schönheit” to describe the
physical changes Christ’s redemption effects in the believer. In the sixth movement of BWV 161, for example, it is through Christ’s resurrection that the decaying body of the believer will be beautifully transformed (Doch auferweckt soll werden, // Durch Christum schön verklärt). In the fourth movement of BWV 162, the singer claims that Christ’s blood can transform the stains of Adam’s old tunic into something beautiful and pure (Ach! laß dein Blut, // den hohen Purpur, decken // Den alten Adamsrock // und seine Lasterflecken, // So werd ich schön und rein). Moreover, two movements later, the physical characteristics of that beautiful transformation are further specified (Itzund werd ich schön geschmücket // Mit dem weißen Himmelskleid. // Mit der güldnen Ehrenkrone // Steh ich da für Gottes Throne). Finally, in the third movement of BWV 163, the singer uses an analogy between one’s heart and a coin to show that Christ polishes the devil’s stain off the heart, restoring its “beautiful look” (schönen Glanz).

The cantata texts that make up the Weihnachts-Oratorium focus on the meaning of Christ’s incarnation, and in various places the word “Schönheit” is used with more specific reference to Christ’s redemption. In the fourth movement of BWV 248-I, for example, we read and hear:

*Bereite dich, Zion, mit zärtlichen Trieben,*
*Den Schönsten, den Liebsten bald bei dir zu sehn!*
*Deine Wangen*  
*Müssen heut viel schöner prangen,*  
*Eile, den Bräutigam sehentlich zu lieben!*

First, the reference to Christ’s identity as “Bräutigam” gestures toward the suffering Christ is willing to undergo for the sake of his bride (the soul). Second, in the recitativo that precedes this aria, the text clarifies the mission of the “Bräutigam,” which is to save
the earth (Nun wird mein liebster Bräutigam, // Nun wird der Held aus Davids Stamm // Zum Trost, zum Heil der Erden // Einmal geboren werden.) Moreover, in the third movement of BWV 248-I, the text refers to that “beautiful morning light” (schönes Morgenlicht) into which the “weak little child” (schwache Knäbellein) was born. The beauty of that child’s birth, the text then implies, is that he will become our joy and consolation by compelling Satan and bringing peace (Soll unser Trost und Freude sein, // Dazu den Satan zwingen // Und letztlich Friede bringen!). The sixth movement of the same cantata expresses the same theme with more urgency, encouraging the listener to hurry to the child because the joy found in him is “zu schön.” Finally, in the eleventh movement of BWV 248-V, we find a textual contrast between “a dark pit” (eine finstre Grube) and a “beautiful chamber hall” (schöner Fürstensaal). The heart may seem like a dark pit and not the beautiful chamber of a prince, but once Christ’s beams of grace (Gnadenstrahl) peek in, the heart will seem as though it is full of sunshine (Wird es voller Sonnen dünken).

In his sacred cantatas, therefore, Bach repeatedly uses texts that include cognates of the same word Birnbaum uses in his reply to Scheibe – “Schönheit” – in the context of Christ’s cosmic redemption. Perhaps this is to be expected, especially given the liturgical setting of his sacred cantatas. As we turn to analyze his usage of that word in his secular cantatas, however, we find remarkable consistency across the distinguishing line between sacred and secular. While his sacred cantatas explicitly reference the beauty of Christ and the secular cantatas (rather appropriately) do not, the form of musical beauty expressed remains strikingly similar.
1.2.5) “Schönheit” in the Secular Cantatas

As Robin Leaver has argued (among many others), it is a mistake to pit “the sacred” and “the secular” against each other in Bach’s work. However, it is also fair to say that the sacred and secular cantatas have different textual emphases, and Bach’s usage of the word “schön” is a good example of such. As we have seen, Bach’s sacred cantatas repeatedly refer to the beauty of Jesus Christ and his redemption of creation; as we will now see, the secular cantatas often refer to the beauty of one important aspect of that creation: music itself. Indeed, some texts Bach chose for his secular cantatas can even align neatly with the fundamental aims of Birnbaum’s argument in the debate against Scheibe, such as the reference to “a beautiful fugue,” (eine schöne Fuge) in BWV 524, likely an early wedding quodlibet. Fugue was precisely the sort of artistic style that Scheibe believed had darkened and overburdened the natural beauty of melody; it was also the sort of artistic style that Birnbaum praised so forcefully.

Yet another secular cantata directly links the conception of beauty in the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate with that displayed in Bach’s compositional practice: BWV 201, “Geschwinde, ihr wirbelnden Winde.” The libretto comes from Picander (1700-1764), who originally published it as “Der Streit zwischen Phoebus und Pan,” a dialogue that dramatizes the musical contest between Phoebus (Apollo) and Pan. Bach likely first

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performed the cantata in 1729, but revived it multiple times after the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate ensued.

Given the obvious similarities between the way beauty is framed in the cantata text and the debate itself, no one should be surprised that Bach would want to revive it for performance. Pan’s perspective clearly tracks along the lines of Scheibe’s, and Phoebus’ along the lines of Birnbaum’s. Moreover, just as in the debate, there is no disagreement about whether or not music is, in some way, intrinsically beautiful; the argument is about what constitutes music’s beauty. Pan argues that he sings more beautifully than all the others (Pan singt vor allen andern schön) because his singing is popular throughout the world (Der ganze Wald bewundert meinen Klang). Importantly, Phoebus responds not by dismissing the beauty of Pan’s music, but by pointing out its theological limitations. “With nymphs you are right,” he argues, “but to please the Gods your flute is too lowly” (Vor Nymphen bist du recht // Allein, die Götter zu vergnügen // Ist deine Flöte viel zu schlecht). Thus far in the dialogue, Pan links music’s beauty to its worldwide popularity, therefore aligning with the position of Scheibe (this man would be the admiration of whole nations if he did not darken the beauty of his works with an excess of art), while Phoebus argues that music’s true beauty resides in pleasing the Gods.

After Phoebus and Pan perform their respective arias, the other characters render their judgments. First, Tmolus sides with Phoebus, reiterating his position that Pan’s music cannot rise above earthly beauty (Pan singet vor dem Wald, // Die Nymphen kann er wohl ergötzen; // Jedoch, so schön als Phoebus’ Klang erschallt // Ist seine Flöte nicht zu schätzen). He then sings his own aria in support of Phoebus, which ends with a curious

72 NBR, 338.
claim: “But he who understands art // and how marvelous your music is // will be lost in it” (Aber wer die Kunst versteht, // Wie dein Ton verwundernd geht, // Wird dabei aus sich verloren). The curious word here is “lost,” or “verloren.” The idea of “being lost” can certainly be negative, as we find in an English word derived from “verloren”: “forlorn.” But in this context, when the speaker is praising the beauty of another, a positive aesthetic possibility opens up: the enormously enjoyable feeling of “losing oneself” in music.

Midas then speaks up on behalf of Pan, and suggests what sort of music Phoebus thinks can provoke this feeling of “losing oneself”: “Phoebus made his music much too ornate” (Phoebus macht es gar zu bunt). Because, on the contrary, Pan sang “lightly and unforced” (sang leicht und ungezwungen), Midas judges his singing to be incomparably beautiful (Singt er unvergleichlich schön). Here, again, we see the sort of aesthetic contrast outlined in the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate. Yet as the drama draws to a close, the other characters team up against Midas, insult his judgment, and declare Phoebus the victor. Bach even adds an alternate version of Momus’ final vindication of Phoebus’ position.

On the musical level, it would be an oversimplification to claim straightforwardly that Pan’s aria (Zu tanze, zu springe) represents the galant style and Phoebus’ aria (Mit Verlangen) represents Bach’s favored polyphonic, chromatically inflected style, though Andre Pirro comes quite close to doing so.73 There are, however, striking musical differences between the two. Pan’s aria is in A-major; Phoebus’ aria is in B-minor. Bach scores Pan’s aria with only two violins (in unison) and continuo; he scores Phoebus’ aria

73 Pirro, L’esthétique de Jean-Sébastien Bach, 461-463.
with a transverse flute (cleverly appropriated from Pan, the flute’s mythical inventor), oboe d’amore, two violins (voiced independently), viola, and continuo. The “A” section of Pan’s aria is light and playful, containing almost no chromaticism or dissonances whatsoever; the “A” section of Phoebus’ aria, on the other hand, is thickly-textured polyphony with breathtaking chromatic expressions of longing. And while Bach does introduce various dissonances and forms of chromaticism into the “B” section of Pan’s aria, they mostly occur on and around the word “mühsam,” suggesting a mock of the alleged “tiredness” of more serious musical expressions of longing (like that of Phoebus). The “B” section of Phoebus’ aria, like so many of Bach’s intimate sacred works also focused on longing, actually intensifies the chromatic language of the “A” section. Here we have a display of Bach’s own aesthetic (against, or perhaps far beyond, the galant aesthetic) in which the listener or performer can easily “lose themselves.”

1.2.6) “Schönheit” in Schemelli’s Musikalisches Gesang-Buch

In 1736 Leipzig, Georg Christian Schemelli published a collection of 954 sacred texts, 69 of which came with music (melody and bass). Although there is some scholarly ambiguity about the extent to which Bach contributed to it, we know that Bach contributed to it substantially. Moreover, many (if not most) of the authors of these texts – such as Paul Gerhardt, Johann von Rist, and Johann Franck – also contributed texts for vocal works to which Bach’s attribution is not in question. Thus, at the very least

An excerpt from Schemelli’s preface reads as follows: “The melodies to be found in this musical song book have been in part quite newly composed and in part improvised in the thorough bass by the most noble Mr. Johann Sebastian Bach, Electoral Saxon Capellmeister and Director Chori Musici in Leipzig.” NBR, 170.
we know that Bach was aware of these texts and took a musical interest in the songbook as a whole; more probably, we can assume that Bach was interested in these texts because they were the very sort of texts he had been interested in throughout his compositional career.

BWV 452 is one of the three sacred songs we know Bach wrote, and its text comes from the Lutheran minister and sacred poet Bartholomäus Crasselius (1667-1724). In it, Crasselius’ speaker affirms the beauty of music and even entreats God to make his singing more beautiful (Verleih mir, Höchster, solche Güte, so wird gewiss mein Singen recht getan, so klingt es schön in meinem Liede). As we have seen, the secular cantatas tend to focus on the beauty of music and the sacred cantatas on the beauty of Christ; here we find the former framed within the context of the latter.

Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676), the Lutheran hymnodist who wrote the texts for a number of Bach’s sacred cantatas, authored the Schemelli texts that make up BWV 451 and 469. The text of BWV 451, which focuses on the effects of Christ’s forgiveness of sins, refers to God as “the most beautiful” (Gott ist das Größte // Das Schönste und Beste). BWV 469, “Ich stehe an deiner Krippen hier,” is a popular Christmas hymn that refers to the beauty of Christ numerous times. The text was originally set to an older melody from Martin Luther (Nun freut euch lieben Christen), but the melody that Bach likely wrote for Schemelli’s songbook has supplanted it in the Protestant Evangelisches Gesangbuch and the Catholic Gotteslob. In the poem, Gerhardt writes of the “beautiful shine” of Christ (dein schöner Glanz), whose rays shine beautifully like the sun (O Sonne, die das werte Licht // des Glaubens in mir zugericht // wie schön sind deine Strahlen). He also calls the moon and stars beautiful (der volle Mond ist schön und klar //
schn in der güldnen Sternen Schar), but for him the eyes of the infant Christ are much more beautiful (dies Äuglein sind viel schöner). Gerhardt’s imagery then shifts from the celestial to the horticultural, while still framing everything within the context of Christ’s beauty (Ich will mir Blumen holen // dass meines Heilands Lager sei // auf Rosen und Violen // mit Tulpen, Nelken, Rosmarin // aus schönen Gärten will ich ihn // von obenher bestreuen).

Johann Franck (1618-1677), the Lutheran poet and politician whose texts Bach used for BWV 180, “Schmücke dich, O Liebe Seele,” BWV 227, “Jesu Meine Freude,” and a variety of other cantatas, also authored BWV 476 in the Schemelli songbook, “Ihr Gestirn, ihr Hohen Lüfte.” Although the word “schn” only appears once in the poem, it arrives in the last stanza at the thematic climax. The antitheses between light and darkness in the first stanza (lichtes Firmament” and “dunklen Klüfte) return in an explicitly Christological context. Although the human heart is, in itself, a dark pit and not a beautiful royal hall (Zwar ist solche Herzensstube // wohl kein schöner Fürstensaal // sondern eine finstre Grube), the mercy of Christ can shine light into that darkness (doch sobald dein Gnadenstrahl // in denselben nur wird blinken // wird es voller Sonnen dünken).

Johann Rist (1607-1667), the Lutheran poet and dramatist who supplied Bach with texts for BWV 20 and 60, “O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort” and BWV 78, “Jesu, der du meine Seele,” also wrote the text for BWV 454 in the Schemelli songbook, “Ermunter dich, mein schwacher Geist.” Rist writes that the day of Christ’s birth shines with beautiful morning light (Brich an, du schönes Morgenlicht). In the next stanza, he then
calls the Christ child “the beautiful one” and asks him to come into his heart (*Komm, Schönster, in mein Herz hinein*).

As we have seen above, Bach took a musical interest in various texts focused on Christological beauty. As we will see below, however, he was also interested in a particular specification of Christological beauty: the beauty of Christ’s light. Indeed, the idea of musical art shining “beautiful light” into nature’s darkness is exactly what Birnbaum articulated in his response to Scheibe, and several texts from the Schemelli songbook provide a theological superstructure for understanding the idea of “beautiful light” in the debate.

1.2.7) Bach and the “Beautiful Light” of Christ

Scheibe claimed that Bach had darkened the beauty of his works with an excess of art, so Birnbaum’s response understandably focuses on the dynamic between light and beauty. “If art imitates nature,” he writes, “then indisputably the natural element must everywhere *shine through* in works of art.” He even links beauty to light specifically: “Now, the greater the art is… the more *brilliantly shines the beauty* thus brought into being.”

75 Theological uses of words related to “light” accordingly abound in Bach’s vocal work, such as BWV 79, movement 5, where the bass and soprano entreat God to “let the brightness of your Word shine on us” (*Lass dein Wort uns helle scheinen*) against the raging of our enemies, and BWV 6, movement 5, where the tenor asks for the light of God’s Word to shine on us and keep us from sin (*Lass das Licht Deines Worts uns heller*).

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75 *NBR*, 345.
scheinen). In his book *Analyzing Bach Cantatas*, Eric Chafe examines the theological significance of light in multiple places, and because this is auxiliary evidence to support my primary claim about beauty, let us turn to those occasions when Bach’s texts refer explicitly to “the beautiful light of Christ.”

The opening line of BWV 474, written by Christian Friedrich Richter (1676-1711), explicitly calls Jesus “the most beautiful light” (*Jesus ist das schönste Licht*). BWV 472, written by the same Gottfried Wilhelm Sacer (1635-1699) whose text Bach used for BWV 11, refers to Jesus as “my soul’s most beautiful light” (*meiner Seelen schönstes Licht*). August Pfeiffer (1640-1698), whose works Bach owned in his own theological library, also wrote the text for BWV 501, which refers to “the delight of Christ’s beautiful light” (*Es hält mich hier entzückt ein schönes Licht*). The same poem also claims that Christ will wear his beautiful “crown of honor” for eternity (*Ihr habt gemacht // dass ich in Ewigkeit // darf desto schöne Ehrenkronen tragen // darf desto schöne Ehrenkronen tragen*), thereby displaying a cruciform image of Christ shining beautiful light into darkness. Similar examples abound in the other texts we have analyzed.

In BWV 472, Sacer explicitly calls Christ “my sun when it is night” (*Jesu, meines Glaubens Zier // Wenn ich traure, meine Wonne // Wenn es Nacht ist, meine Sonne*). In BWV 501, Pfeiffer says good night to Christ as he descends into the dark grave of death (*So gibst du nun, mein Jesu, gute Nacht!* and “*wird von dem Tod ins finstre Grab gedrückt*”), and in between these lines he writes that on the cross, Christ’s suffering is completed (*dein Leiden ist vollbracht*). Pfeiffer even gives thanks to Christ for all of his

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pain and trouble (Weicht, Schmerz und Weh die ihr mich in der Zeit so hart gedrückt: Habt Dank für eure Plagen). In BWV 474, Richter writes that Christ has consumed all suffering himself (er verzehret alles Leid) and that the forces of hell cannot overcome the bond Christ has with him (Jesus soll mich nur besitzen // lasst die Höllenkräfte blitzen // kann ich nur in Jesu sein).

Many more examples could be adduced from any of these texts, but because the general point has been made, let us move on to analyze how the idea of cruciform darkness actually plays out in terms of Bach’s aesthetic use of dissonance. After all, the cruciform words we just highlighted, such as “Leiden” and “Schmerz,” are precisely the ones onto which Bach lavished some of his most expressive dissonances. The beautiful light of Christ, it seems, even shines into nature’s dissonant darkness.

1.2.8) Dissonance in Bach’s Musical Oeuvre

Before proceeding into an exploration of dissonance in Bach’s musical oeuvre, a few clarifications and qualifications about my musicological methodology are in order: First, a complete study of dissonance in Bach would require a dissertation or more in itself.77 I therefore must cull the most relevant examples from that vast region for the

77 The most substantive theological treatment of Bach’s understanding of tonality is Chafe, Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J.S. Bach (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), in which he argues that tonality served an allegorical (and ultimately theological) function in Bach’s music. Karl D. Braunschweig, in his article “Expanded Dissonance in the Music of J.S. Bach” argues that Bach dramatically expanded dissonances in places he might otherwise be expected to resolve them quickly. It “recurs with surprising consistency,” (83) he claims, and is “an important compositional device and a favorite of J.S. Bach, who used it regularly to heighten text expression and to dramatize important musical events in his works,” (110) such as in the
purposes of this limited study. The plan is to begin by touching briefly on the Christological dimensions of one of the most “misshapen” of examples in Bach’s instrumental music (Das Musikalisches Opfer), move to examples from the cantatas in which dissonance relates directly to the figure of Christ, and conclude with the Passion oratorios in which dissonance is used extensively to striking theological effect. Second, I recognize that “dissonance” or even “lack of resolution in music” is a complicated phenomenon that depends on a variety of contextual factors, not least the relationship between melody and harmony in rhythmic time. I have attempted to recognize these contextual limitations when necessary, but it is important to remember that my primary claim here is about Bach’s own aesthetic understanding rather than about the ontological status of dissonance. Third, I am not arguing that Bach always uses dissonance and chromaticism in the same ways, nor am I arguing that every single usage of intervals like the minor-second or augmented-fourth is theologically significant. Bach’s tonal language is rich and varied, and the meaning he intends to generate from it is likely also rich and varied. I am arguing, however, that there are an astonishing number of examples in which Bach is clearly using these forms (minor-second and augmented-fourth/diminished-fifth) of dissonance for this overarching theological purpose.

One further clarification will be necessary before delving into the music: what does Birnbaum mean, on a practical artistic level, of art “forming” misshapen states to make them more beautiful? How does an artist like Bach take a dissonant interval like the aria “Erbarme Dich” in the Matthew Passion. As we will see in chapter four especially, Braunschweig’s claims align neatly with the major claims of this dissertation. Karl D. Braunschweig, “Expanded Dissonance in the Music of J.S. Bach,” Theory and Practice 28 (2003): 79-113.
augmented-fourth, render it into artistic form, and end up with something “more beautiful”?

First, at the micro level, we often find him placing a dissonant interval into the context of a largely consonant, diatonic melody. Second, melodies formed out of various dissonant intervals are often simultaneously accompanied by different consonant, diatonic melodies that ‘soften the blow’ of dissonance. Third, there is the overarching, ‘horizontal’ context of harmonic resolution, which always occurs at the end of a work but also typically occurs at the end of a section like the “A” or “B” section of a da capo aria. Fourth, there is the context that stretches beyond any purely musical reference because it refers to the one who created music itself: Jesus Christ. In this dimension, Bach uses music to gesture toward Christ’s power to resolve all dissonances on the cross, a gesture that will be clarified in the parts that follow this one and conclude the chapter.

1.2.9) Dissonance in Bach’s Instrumental Music

If the theme that spun forth Bach’s Invention No. 1 in C Major is nicely shaped, then the theme that Frederick the Great gave Bach, which became Das Musikalisches Opfer, is a truly hellish one. The Invention theme ebbs and flows in stepwise fashion; Frederick’s theme jumps around awkwardly and then decays. The Invention theme stays entirely within the diatonic framework of C Major; Frederick’s theme has no interest in home keys and revels in its chromatic wandering. The Invention theme’s variations sound like a slender sample of what the seminal theme could potentially produce; even a
luminary like Arnold Schoenberg found Frederick’s theme contrapuntally dead. By calling Frederick’s theme “difficult,” then, Michael Marissen is surely understating the matter. Not many themes could render Bach sheepish, apologizing for his lack of creativity and sending him home anxious to prove he could do better.

Yet after Bach had some time to work on an expanded version, he sent it back to Frederick with a revealing dedication:

With awesome pleasure I still remember the very special Royal Grace when, some time ago, during my visit to Potsdam, Your Majesty’s Self deigned to play to me a theme for a fugue upon the clavier, and at the same time charged me most graciously to carry it out in Your Majesty’s August Presence. To obey Your Majesty’s command was my most humble duty. I noticed very soon, however, that, for lack of necessary preparation, the execution of the task did not fare as well as such an excellent theme demanded. I resolved therefore and promptly pledged myself to work out this right Royal theme more fully and then make it known to the world. This resolve has now been carried out as well as possible, and it has none other than this irreproachable intent, to glorify, if only in a small point, the fame of a Monarch whose greatness and power, as in all the sciences of war and peace, so especially in music, everyone must admire and revere.

The revelation here is certainly not Bach’s sycophantic posture toward powerful rulers, and his reference to Frederick’s “excellent theme” could be interpreted in this light. The revelation comes from the specific words Bach uses to explain his reason for the expanded work: “vollkommener auszuarbeiten,” or “to work out more completely” the theme Frederick gave him. This language also bears a striking resemblance to Birnbaum’s description of the relationship between art and nature: “if art aids Nature,” he writes, “then its aim is only to preserve it, and to improve its condition; certainly not to

78 A theme that even “the great contrapuntist Arnold Schoenberg said would yield exactly zero canonic imitations.” Gaines, *Evening in the Palace of Reason*, 230.
80 *NBR*, 226.
destroy it.”\textsuperscript{81} Judging from the final version of \textit{Das Musikalisches Opfer}, Bach certainly did not destroy Frederick’s theme. In the final version, the theme is both stated from the outset and restated in various forms throughout. And if we bracket Bach’s obsequious description of the theme as “excellent,” his expanded project becomes clear: Frederick had given him a theme that appears naturally misshapen – naturally ungestalt – he had struggled (according to his own standards) to work out its contrapuntal implications on the spot, and he had returned home in order to work it out more completely, to get closer to its \textit{Gestalt}, to use art to improve its condition as much as possible. The end result, in the terms of the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate, was Bach’s beautification of an awfully misshapen – perhaps to some ears even \textit{ugly} – musical theme. If we recall, too, that Bach reportedly called Frederick’s theme “exceedingly beautiful,” perhaps we understand how expansive Bach’s notion of musical beauty really was.\textsuperscript{82} He could even call a theme that he \textit{must} have known was extraordinarily difficult and awkward “beautiful.”

It might seem, at this point, that the meaning of \textit{Das Musikalisches Opfer} should be restricted to the realm of philosophical aesthetics alone. After all, Bach adds no words to the given theme and a political ruler is both the giver of the theme and the recipient of its final version. However, as Michael Marissen has argued in his essay “The Theological

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 345, italics added.

Birnbaum even uses the word “\textit{vollkommener}” in his debate with Scheibe: “\textit{Je größer nun die kunst ist, das ist, je fleißiger und sorgfältiger sie an der ausbeßerung der natur arbeitet, desto vollkommener glänzt die dadurch hervorgebrachte Schönheit.”

\textsuperscript{82} To be sure, Bach was also likely trying to flatter Frederick and curry his favor. Nevertheless, we also know that Bach could attempt to subvert the power of those above him, as exemplified in BWV 198 (footnote 56 in this chapter). Accordingly, it seems reasonable to assume that Bach was being genuine (calling the theme “beautiful”) but also exaggerating (calling it “exceedingly” beautiful).
Character of Bach’s Musical Offering,” Bach likely had more than a mere philosophical or aesthetic interest in developing Frederick’s theme to its limits. According to Marissen, Bach intended the work to be “an homage to God,” and used various features of the initial theme (especially its descending chromatic movement) to subvert Frederick’s own glory as a political ruler and draw attention to the glory of Jesus Christ on the cross. Even in the absence of words, there is thus a particularly theological, even cruciform, notion of beauty at work here.

1.2.10) Dissonance in Bach’s Vocal Music

While Marissen may have made a convincing case regarding the cruciform character of Bach’s Das Musikalisches Opfer, analyses of instrumental music are notoriously fraught with ambiguity. Because of this ambiguity, I will be moving on from Bach’s instrumental music and will focus on a variety of misshapen musical examples from his vocal oeuvre. For once words enter the picture, the theological meaning of Bach’s music becomes increasingly clear. In his sacred cantatas and oratorios, we find Bach forming misshapen musical figures, such as the minor-second and tritone, into art in order to display their beauty.

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83 Marissen, “The Theological Character of Bach’s ‘Musical Offering’,” Bach and God. 84 Ibid., 172. 85 In this vein, we can also note that Laurence Dreyfus makes a similar case about Bach using instrumental music for cruciform purposes in BWV 198, the Trauer Ode. According to him, Bach inserts a melody from BWV 56, “Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen,” in order to prioritize the meaning of Christ’s death over that of a secular ruler. Dreyfus, Bach and the Patterns of Invention, 234-236. 86 For example, this is the conceptual basis of Daniel K.L. Chua’s book Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
1.2.11) Dissonance in the Sacred Cantatas

We begin with Bach’s sacred cantatas, which constitute the bulk of his vocal music. Due to the sheer volume of music involved, this section can only offer a sampling of the ways in which Bach uses artistic form to make dissonances more beautiful.\(^{87}\) Moreover, because dissonance is such a complex musical phenomenon, I will mostly limit my focus to two of the most common and identifiable forms of dissonance Bach uses: the minor-second (or “half step) and the augmented-fourth (or “tritone). What we find from this survey of dissonance in the cantatas is that Bach tends to use these intervals when setting texts related to human pain and suffering, and especially when the text focuses on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Take, for example, the way in which Bach uses dissonance in BWV 57, “Selig ist der Mann.” The opening theme itself is dissonant, ending abruptly on an F# and generating dissonance with the G that precedes it. This minor-second dissonance is then further utilized to convey the “Anfechtung” of sin and, more importantly, the “Krone des Lebens” that those who remain steadfast (like Christ on the cross wearing the Krone already) will receive. Later in the aria, Bach again uses the minor-second to set the word “Krone,” this time enveloping it on either side with two sumptuous, largely diatonic phrases that flow right through the dissonance. In the haunting soprano aria that follows

\(^{87}\) The idea of “using art to make dissonances more beautiful” will be explained more fully in the following chapters (especially chapter four). In this chapter, the important point is that Bach claimed (through Birnbaum) that art could beautify natural dissonances, and that he often used dissonances in the context of Christological drama.
two movements later, “Ich wünschte mir den Tod,” Bach repeatedly uses the minor-second on the word “Tod” in order to convey the pain of being separated from Christ.

Likewise, in the second movement of BWV 4, a cantata focused on the meaning of Christ’s death, the soprano and alto soloists’ opening exchanges are set to the same minor-second motif on “den Tod.” A few movements later, in the bass aria “Hier ist das rechte Osterlamm,” Bach draws one of his chromatic sideways crosses on the word “Kreuzes,” generating dissonance with the A# and the B natural that precedes it. He then uses a minor-second to finish out the melodic line and, only to use two more to depict Christ’s blood (Blut) literally drawing (zeichnet) our door into eternal life.

Or consider the striking tonal contrast in the fifth movement of BWV 69a, an aria focused on Christ’s role as personal redeemer. Bach uses a minor-second on the word “Kreuz” before using a series of chromatic notes (especially C-natural and B-flat, held longer than any other in the melisma) to convey the pain of “Leiden.” The sort of dissonance achieved by using these chromatic notes enables Bach to jar the listener on the word “Freude,” when the singer exults in purely diatonic melismas. The dissonance of suffering, in other words, heightens the joyful consonance that follows. In the theoretical language we considered earlier, this is a wonderful example of Bach alternating dissonances and consonances to produce a more pleasing whole.  

In BWV 72, Bach employs a variety of dissonances on words like “Weh” and “Sterben” in the first recitative, but the soprano aria “Mein Jesus will es tun” offers one of the most theologically interesting uses of dissonances in all of Bach’s cantatas. It begins as a sprightly ¾ dance in C Major, reflecting the singer’s joyful confidence that

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88 NBR, 343.
Jesus will do what he has claimed. About halfway through, however, the text shifts to “obgleich dein Herze liegt in viel Bekümmernissen” and Bach naturally modulates to its relative minor (A minor). The descending vocal lines that follow are filled with dissonances, especially minor-second intervals, and are hardly noteworthy in themselves. The truly striking move happens in the oboe line as the singer mourns those troubles. Now in the minor mode, it plays one of the flowing diatonic phrases from the opening ritornello material above the singer’s dissonant lament. The listener now hears an echo of that joyful confidence, almost as a reminder of what Jesus will do for the singer even in her deepest troubles. What is it that Jesus will do? The explicit textual reference is to the intriguing but vague notion of “sweetening one’s cross” (er will dein Kreuz versüssen), though the final vocal line hints at a specification of what sweetening the cross is all about: resolving dissonance. When the soloist sings her very last iteration of “Mein Jesus will es tun,” Bach gives the viola and violin 1 parts a momentary, tantalizing dissonance that is immediately resolved. There seems to be no purely musical explanation for this; it comes out of nowhere and Bach could easily have ended the aria without it. But he seemingly could not resist the urge to resolve one more dissonance to drive the theological point home emphatically.

The final example we will consider here is one of Bach’s very finest cantatas, and one that focuses explicitly on the meaning of Christ’s crucifixion: BWV 56, “Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen.” The opening theme of the title aria, passed from the Violin 2 to the Violin 1 and eventually to the continuo, contains a minor-second on precisely the notes that the singer then sings as “Kreuzstab.” Again, we find Bach using the minor-second on words associated with the cross. As the aria proceeds, Bach focuses his
melismatic attention on words like “tragen” and “Plagen,” using downward chromatic motion to draw the stumbling of someone carrying the cross and the suffering that Christ leads one through. At the end of the aria, when the text shifts to the tears that Christ will wipe away, Bach uses both minor seconds and tritones on the word “Tränen,” at one point even moving directly from one to the other on three repeated notes. In the second to last movement, thematically linked to the first, Bach returns to these dissonant intervals to draw tears yet again. This time, however, he also gives the continuo a low pedal C against the first violin’s D flats, generating a harsh minor-second dissonance. Strikingly, this recitative then resolves to one of the brightest and happiest of all keys: C Major. A Christological Affekt is thus achieved: the listener hears and feels Christ wiping away the pain of tears and resolving that dissonance.

We could continue on but as I said before, entire books could be written on the subject of dissonance in Bach’s cantatas alone. Before moving on to an analysis of the theological sources that funded Bach’s conception of dissonance, however, let us take a few examples from Bach’s most ambitious and substantive musical treatment of Christology: the Passion oratorios. In them, Bach’s use of dissonance tracks along similar lines as the cantatas, but now with a heightened dramatic dimension. Not only does Christ sing dissonances repeatedly; the characters react to his actions in like manner.

1.2.12) Dissonance in the Christus Roles in the Passion Oratorios

In his very first appearance in the St. Matthew Passion, Bach gives the Christus figure yet another series of dissonances on a text related to the cross. Foretelling his
crucifixion, Christus sings several minor-second intervals on “Dass er gekreuzigt werden.” As the story progresses, the incarnation of Christ is represented musically as a descending D Major figure (Meine Zeit ist hier) and Christ’s instruction to the disciples to sit while he prays is a descending B flat major figure (Setzet euch hier). In each case, though, Bach then radically alters his tonal expression to fit the Christological drama. In the former case, Christ predicts his betrayal with a series of dissonant shifts in the string accompaniment to the vocal line (Wahrlich ich sage euch, einer unter euch wird mich verraten). The word “verraten” is even treated with a tritone to convey the evil of Judas’ betrayal. In the latter case, Christ sings “Meine seele ist” using the same consonant C major intervals we observed above. When the word “betrübt” is added, however, the painfully dissonant minor-second interval is used again. The very last line Christus sings, his cry of dereliction, is dissonant both in relation to the continuo itself and in the intervals used for the second iteration of “Eli.” Notably absent here is the divine “string halo” that provided an envelope of consonance around all the dissonances related to his human suffering up to that point. This upsets the listeners’ expectations, making the dissonances even more audibly potent than they would be without this prior context of consonance. Here, perhaps, is Christ’s descent into hell represented in its most dramatic musical form: dissonance without its expected consonant envelopment.

1.2.13) Dissonance in the Passion Choruses, Recitatives, and Arias

Having surveyed some representative examples of dissonance in Bach’s writing for Jesus Christ in the St. Matthew Passion, let us now expand our scope to include the
ways in which Bach uses dissonance when other characters react to the Christological events unfolding. First, and in even more striking fashion than the opening chorus of the *St. Matthew Passion*, Bach opens the *St. John Passion* with a series of wrenching dissonances. Alex Ross describes them in wonderful detail:

“O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” The words of the Psalm look bright on the page, but the music pulls them into shadow. The key is G minor. The bass instruments drone on the tonic while the violins weave sixteenth notes around the other notes of the triad. On the third beat of the first bar comes a twinge of harmonic pain—one oboe sounding an E-flat against another oboe’s held D. Oboes are piercing by nature; to place them a half step apart triggers an aggressive acoustic roughness, as when car horns lean on adjacent pitches. In the next several bars, more dissonances accumulate, sustaining tension: F-sharp against G, A-flat against G, E-flat against D, B-flat against A-natural. The ensemble wanders away from the home key and then back, whereupon the cycle begins again, now with a chorus singing “Herr, unser Herrscher” (Lord, our ruler) in chords that contract inward:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Herr!} \\
\text{Herr!} \\
\text{Herr!} \\
\text{unser H-}r-r \ldots
\end{align*}
\]

When the upper voices reach “Herrscher,” they dissolve into the swirl of the violins, the first syllable elongated into a thirty-three-note melisma. You need not have seen the words *Passio secundum Johannem* at the head of the score to feel that this is the scene at Golgotha: an emaciated body raised on the Cross, nails being driven in one by one, blood trickling down, a murmuring crowd below. It goes on for nine or ten minutes, in an irresistible sombre rhythm, a dance of death that all must join.\(^89\)

From the very outset, then, Bach uses dissonance to set the stage for the drama. The listener hears that “harmonic pain” and now expects violence. So a little later in the work, when the narrative is unfolding and the violence Ross describes is just brewing, Bach has

a bass soloist react to Pilate’s flogging of Christ. He puts the scriptural story on pause and hones in on the reaction of this person, a fictional witness to Pilate’s brutality who sings about it with reflective tenderness. The text reads:

*Betrachte, meine Seel, mit ängstlichem Vergnügen,*
*Mit bittrer Lust und halb beklemmtem Herzen*
*Dein höchstes Gut in Jesu Schmerzen,*
*Wie dir auf Dornen, so ihn stechen,*
*Die Himmelsschlüsselblumen blühn!*
*Du kannst viel süße Frucht von seiner Wermut brechen*
*Drum sieh ohn Unterlass auf ihn!*

The words that startle the listener here are not “*bittrer,*” “*Schmerzen,*” or “*stechen*”; the language of pain and suffering naturally fits the gruesome character of crucifixion. Instead, the words that startle are the lofty rhetorical ones (*Dein höchstes Gut*) and ones that offer images of sensuous delight (*Die Himmelsschlüsselblumen blühn* and *viel süße Frucht*). After all, why would someone juxtapose pain and suffering with flowers and fruit?

The answer lies in the music itself, where Bach again “alternates consonance and dissonance” to “produce a pleasing whole.” Take, as a microcosmic example, the tonal shift from “*Dein höchstes Gut*” to “*in Jesu Schmerzen.*” Bach gives the former phrase a pitch for every syllable, beginning and ending on C-natural and filling out the major triad within the octave. The effect is of an ordered progression upward, a path toward the highest good. The latter phrase begins by leaping up to E-flat on “*Jesu*” (the highest vocal pitch in the entire arioso) before dropping down a tritone to “*Schmerzen.*” The effect is an evocation of humiliation, a painful path downward from the heights. With the well-ordered tonality of C major, Bach has seduced the listener into considering his or
her highest good. With the harsh descent of the tritone, he has slammed his point home: your highest good lies in the pain and suffering of Christ on the cross. Shortly thereafter, the tritone is used again on the word “stechen” to convey the sharp pain of thorns. If the singer’s melodic line were given to an instrument and the words were taken away, Bach would still have achieved the artistic effect working to resolve dissonance beautifully. Even while the soloist’s melodic line moves through these painful dissonances, it does so on top of a lush bed of largely consonant instrumental accompaniment. And, of course, everything resolves harmonically at the arioso’s end. But when words return to the picture, the theological meaning of Bach’s tonal contrasts becomes clear: Christ’s suffering resolves dissonance.

This connection between tonal contrast and the suffering of Christ is made even more explicit in an aria that comes later in the John Passion: “Es ist vollbracht,” or “It is completed.” In the “A” section of the aria focused on “die Trauer Nacht” of Christ’s crucifixion, we hear painful, anguished uses of chromaticism, only for “der Held aus Juda” to arrive in the “B” section with melismatic fanfare in D-Major to “schließ den Kampf.” The aria closes with a return to the “A” section because the crucifixion story is not yet over, but the theological gesture is clear: Christ’s suffering on the cross ends the struggle, brings things to completion, resolves dissonance.

If we shift now to the St. Matthew Passion, two arias are especially relevant because of the connection between dissonance and crucifixion. Take, for example, one of the most misshapen of all of Bach’s arias, “Komm, süßes Kreuz.” In the preceding recitative, Bach sets the word “Blut” to a descending tritone, only to use a minor-second on “herber” a few lines later. The aria opens with a series of angular chromatic figures in
the viola da gamba, only for the soloist to be given a minor-second on the opening iterations of the title text. In the “B section,” Bach almost syllabically speeds through “wird mir mein” in order to arrive at “Leiden,” which really piques his melismatic interest. He then sends the singer through a tortuous chromatic maze that includes a minor-second (F#-G) followed by a tritone (G-C#), again also likely drawing a cross in the process.

Or consider how Bach uses the tritone in the gorgeous aria “Aus Liebe will Mein Heiland Sterben” and the recitative that immediately precedes it. “Was hat er denn übels getan?” Pilate sings, hitting the first syllable of “übels” with an ascending tritone. The soprano soloist responds directly: “Er hat uns allen wohl getan.” She then lists his good deeds, and Bach gives her a tritone on the one that deals with the devil explicitly: “er trieb die Teufel fort.” The singer then shifts her attention to the greatest of Christ’s good deeds and his motivation for doing it: aus Liebe. On those opening words, Bach gives her a smooth and sumptuous diatonic melisma, luring the listener even deeper into the ethereal sound world the flute and oboes have already created in the opening ritornello material. As the text flows forward to the word “sterben,” however, the tritone reappears and launches a descending chromatic figure down into the grave. In this moment of high theo-drama, Bach uses the tritone, the “devil’s interval,” to show that Christ drives the devil out by absorbing evil, even to the point of death. This Affekt is certainly haunting, and one can understandably be puzzled at how anyone might consider it beautiful. But it is precisely in an aria like this that Bach’s theological aesthetics – and the influences that shaped it – begins to come into view. Chapters two through four will explain how it is so.
Before moving on to the next chapter, however, we must take note of one cantata that links all of these themes and points in the same Lutheran direction as “Aus Liebe”: BWV 125, “Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin.” The cantata text is a mixture of Luther’s hymn of the same name and an anonymous librettist’s expansion upon it. The first movement “connects and alternates consonances and dissonances” as Birnbaum describes, with its juxtaposition of a largely consonant motif of joy in the accompaniment with various dissonances focused especially around the word “Tod.” Bach thereby creates both a sense of death’s dissonance and the believer’s consonant “peace and joy” when dying in Christ. The third movement, a recitative for bass, explains further that the source of that consolation at death is Christ, “the creator of all things” (dem Schöpfer aller Dinge). It is the creator and redeemer Christ who shines, in the following duet for tenor and bass, an “unfathomable light that fills the entire circle of the Earth” (Ein unbegreiflich Licht erfüllt den ganzen Kreis der Erden). That Christological light fills the entire circle of Earth, ringing powerfully through and through (Es schallet kräftig fort und fort). Given the universal scope of this claim, we must assume that it includes even the imperfections of musical nature and the mortal human body.

1.3.1) Summary of Chapter One

The goal of this chapter has been to develop a unified conception of Bachian aesthetics from both a theoretical and practical perspective. Implied in this goal is the assumption that Bach held a coherent position on the beauty of music in both theoretical

90 NBR, 343.
and practical terms, and I hope to have shown that such a claim is at least plausible, if not clearly demonstrated. In his own lifetime, Bach may have written and spoken at length about the beauty of music, the beauty of God, and the relationship between the two. But in the twenty-first century, hardly any such documents exist. We must use what remains, and I have been arguing that the extant fragments of Bachian theoretical aesthetics harmonize with his practical work, in which the idea of Christological beauty features prominently.

In particular, we can tell that Bach very likely believed the following: a) that musical nature is intrinsically beautiful but flawed, b) that dissonance is one of those natural flaws, c) that a skillful artist can beautify those flaws by resolving them in the overarching context of consonance, d) that consonance can shine resolving “light” into unresolved dissonant “darkness,” e) that Christ deserves the appellation of “the beautiful,” “the most beautiful,” and that he is “the most beautiful light,” f) that he could use tonal contrasts to express the beauty of the Christological drama we find in the sacred cantatas and especially in the Passion oratorios, and g) that Christ is the creator and redeemer of all things, including music, and that the beautiful light that emits from him fills even the darkest, most dissonant, parts of musical nature. Where exactly Bach received these ideas from, and what he added to them, will be the subject of the following chapters.
Chapter 2: Lutheran Aesthetics in Outline

“Anyone who is concerned with the world in all its range, with forms and proportions, with man’s heroism, with morality, with the splendor of forms, with the exploration of the sphere of myth, will feel repelled by Protestantism. Luther destroyed the rich treasury of myth, and replaced it with an arid, official Institute. Anyone enamored of beauty will shiver in the barn of the Reformation, just as Winckelmann did, and feel the pull of Rome.”\(^\text{91}\)

- Gerhard Nebel

“The beauty of God’s love becomes apparent in proportion to the ugliness it suffers.”\(^\text{92}\)

- Miikka E. Anttila, describing the aesthetics of Martin Luther

2.1.1) Introduction

“Eros is of a markedly aesthetic character,” the Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren writes in Agape and Eros. But “to speak of the ‘beauty’ of God in the context of Agape,” he continues, “sounds very like blasphemy.”\(^\text{93}\) For Nygren, who closely (and divisively) aligns Eros with ancient Greece and Agape with Christianity, this signals nothing less than a rejection of Christian theological aesthetics altogether. And Nygren is not alone. Even within his own lifetime and his own Lutheran tradition, he could find support from Rudolf Bultmann, who claimed: “The idea of the beautiful is of no significance in forming the life of Christian faith, which sees in the beautiful the

\(^{91}\) Gerhard Nebel, Das Ereignis des Schönen (Stuttgart: Klett, 1953), 188.
\(^{92}\) Miikka Anttila. Luther’s Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure (Göttingen: De Gruyter, 2013), 167.
temptation of a false transfiguration of the world which distracts the gaze from ‘beyond.’”

This anti-aesthetic strain in modern Lutheran theology partly provoked Hans Urs von Balthasar to attempt his own theological defense of beauty in *Die Herrlichkeit*, where Luther serves as an anti-aesthetic turning point in the history of theology. So we should not be terribly surprised to find another modern Lutheran theologian, Mark C. Mattes, claiming: “Among all the major Reformers, Luther would seem the least likely source for finding anything of significance for beauty.” Indeed, according to him, “the topic of beauty in Luther has rarely been examined.” He even goes on to say, writing in 2017, that it is now “a commonplace to assert that Protestant theology offers little for a theory of beauty or theological aesthetics.” He also hopes to rectify that problem by “reappraising” Luther’s aesthetics and its alleged non-existence.

Joining Mattes in this revival of Lutheran aesthetics is Miikka E. Anttila, whose article “Die Ästhetik Luthers” provides an overview of Luther’s writings on beauty, and whose book *Luther’s Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure* will feature throughout this dissertation. While Mattes devotes only one chapter to music within his broader aesthetic study, Anttila’s entire book focuses on Luther’s theology of music and its sources, with occasional attention to its aesthetic dimensions. Toward the end of the

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95 Consider, for example, that von Balthasar begins his narration of “the Protestant version” of “the elimination of aesthetics from theology” with Luther, and repeatedly references Luther throughout his account of anti-aesthetic Protestant theology. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Volume 1: Seeing the Form, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 45-90.
96 Mattes, 1.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid., 183.
100 Anttila, *Luther’s Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure*. 

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book, Anttila addresses a question that has seldom been asked, even in the many studies of Luther’s theology of music: “Are there some kinds of aesthetic standards according to which Luther judges music?” \footnote{Anttila, 14.}

He also understands, like Mattes, that an answer to this question will require “a sketch of Luther’s conception of beauty.” \footnote{Ibid.} Music may well be “one of the most beautiful gifts of God” \footnote{“Der schönste und herrlichsten Gaben Gottes,” Martin Luther, Tischreden in D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, ed. Karl Drescher, 2d ser. (Weimar: Herman Böhlau, 1912-21), 490. German references will come from the Weimar Ausgabe and will follow as WA no. or Volume:Page.} according to Luther, but music is still only one part of the divine-human drama that Luther finds so beautiful.

One of the central claims of this dissertation is that this ‘anti-aesthetic Luther’ has made it difficult for both theologians and musicologists to see the aesthetic connection between Luther and Bach; as a corollary to this claim, I am also claiming that the ‘rediscovery’ of Luther’s (and Lutheran) aesthetics opens up new areas of research in Bach scholarship. Before we arrive there in chapter four, however, we must first flesh out exactly what “Lutheran aesthetics” looks like (this chapter), and how music fits into that picture (next chapter).

Because the following two chapters lay in between chapters focused on Bach’s aesthetics, their aim is not to provide a full outline or exhaustive description of Lutheran aesthetics. Rather, their aim is to do the following: a) provide a general outline of Lutheran aesthetics, both in Luther’s thought and in those who followed him up to the time of Bach, b) analyze the role of key aesthetic concepts that emerged in chapter one, such as “nature,” “light/darkness,” and “Christology,” and c) explore in chapter three, the way in which music is treated in this aesthetic scheme. At that point, at the end of chapter
three, enough conceptual pieces will be in place to re-read chapter one in light of chapters
two and three, thus showing how Bach is likely to have interpreted the tradition of
Lutheran aesthetics in his time.

2.2.1) Lutheran Aesthetics in Outline

Because Bach was exposed to Martin Luther’s own theological writings throughout his life (both by necessity and choice), the first task of this chapter will be to outline the aesthetic thought of Luther himself. However, because almost exactly two hundred years separate the lives of Luther and Bach, we cannot focus only on Bach’s reception of Luther’s personal writings themselves. We must also take into account the relevant intervening theological developments between them. After all, many of the aesthetic texts Bach set to music were written by Lutheran theologians and ministers who had already inherited Luther’s aesthetic thought and interpreted it themselves. Moreover, Bach’s own personal theological library contained many works by post-Luther Lutheran theologians. Therefore, the second part of this section will analyze the ways in which Luther’s aesthetic thought was likely to have been filtered down to Bach through intermediary figures such as Johann Arndt (1555-1621) and Johann Gerhard (1582-1637).

2.2.2) Martin Luther’s Aesthetics in Outline
“While beauty is not a major theme in Luther’s work,” Mattes writes, “it is a crucial theme. It shapes the question of who God is, who Christ is, and who we are in Christ.”

To put the matter another way, Luther spends much more time talking about issues like sin and justification than about beauty, but his reflections on beauty encompass every theological issue (including sin and justification). Because Luther defines true beauty as Christ’s redemption of the fallen cosmos, it has a “meta” character that stretches from creation, through the intermediate dramatic stages of fall, Israel, incarnation, and church, before ultimately pointing to future eschatological consummation. Accordingly, I have structured this chapter to reflect the dramatic scope of beauty in Luther’s thought. Along the way, I will intentionally be focusing on the aesthetic sub-topics that emerged from chapter one, as mentioned above.

Moreover, given that the overarching claim of this dissertation is about the aesthetic influence of Luther (and Lutheranism) on Bach, I will be focusing as much as possible on texts in which Luther uses the word “Schönheit” or its related cognates. These are, linguistically at least, the closest connections between the texts of Luther and the texts of Bach. However, because Christian theology necessarily involves multiple translated languages (even within the biblical canon itself) and Luther himself weaves in and out of German and Latin in his own writing, I will also be including Luther’s Latin references to beauty, which tend to revolve around the word “pulchritudo.” And because this study is focused on the words “schön/Schönheit” and “pulchrum/pulchritudo” (and variations of them), I will be citing the original texts involving these words but not all other Luther references. Bach knew Latin well, and although we have hardly any Latin

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104 Mattes, 71.
texts written by Bach himself, we can safely assume that he could read Luther’s Latin writings.

2.2.3) The Beauty of Creation

For Luther, Christ is supremely beautiful and, accordingly, so was the world God created through him prior to the Fall.105 “Was not the heaven adorned with light,” Luther asks in his Lectures on Genesis, “which was created on the first day, something which was surely the most beautiful adornment of the entire creation?”106 Luther claims that before human beings were even created, the non-human world was created beautifully by the Word: “This is the work of the fourth day, on which those most beautiful creatures were created by the Word, namely, the sun and moon, together with all the rest of the stars.”107 Luther even associates the beauty of the sun with the presence of the Word in creation: “if they (the wise men) want to find (the star), they have to follow the Word. That is the true star and the beautiful sun, which points toward Christ.”108 Moreover,

105 Luther repeatedly refers to the world being created “through the Word,” or “by the Word,” a clear Christological reference to the logos theology in the prologue of John’s gospel. (See, for example: “I have said that in the beginning there was created through the Word that unformed mass of earth and heaven (which he calls waters and likewise abyss), and that this must be assigned to the work of the first day,” LW 1:16, or “Yet because these very fine and soft substances were created by the Word, they preserve their form and motion most perfectly and firmly,” in LW 1:24). All English translations of Luther’s works in this dissertation will be taken from: Martin Luther, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., Luther’s Works (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958) and will be cited as LW Volume:Page.
106 LW 1:39.
107 Ibid., 1:40.
before “the earth was disfigured by sin,” Luther also writes, “the light of the sun also was more brilliant and beautiful when it was created.”

He reiterates the same idea later on:

“I have no doubt that before sin the air was purer and more healthful, and the water more prolific; yes, even the sun’s light was more beautiful and clearer.” Moreover, in this prelapsarian state, even the serpent that precipitated human sin was beautiful. “The world was most beautiful from the beginning,” he writes. “Eden was truly a garden of delight and joy.”

When Luther describes the creation of Adam, aesthetic language pours forth:

Both his inner and outer sensations were all of the purest kind. His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straightforward—all in the most beautiful tranquility of mind, without any fear of death and without any anxiety. To these inner qualities came also those most beautiful and superb qualities of body and of all the limbs, qualities in which he surpassed all the remaining living creatures. I am fully convinced that before Adam’s sin his eyes were so sharp and clear that they surpassed those of the lynx and eagle. He was stronger than the lions and the bears, whose strength is very great; and he handled them

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109 LW 1:78.
110 Ibid., 1:204.
111 Ibid., 1:187, “Immediately after this word of the curse had been uttered, the serpent was changed from a most beautiful (pulcherrima) form into a most shameful and disgusting one.” See also LW 1:152: “And I believe too that the serpent has also lost most of its cleverness, which Moses mentions here as an extraordinary gift of the Creator. Just as today the serpent is the evil one among the animals, so I hold that it was then a beautiful (pulchrum), good, blessed, and lovely creature, with which not only man but also the rest of the animals enjoyed living,” and “This is my idea about the natural serpent, which Satan wanted to misuse and which at that time was a most beautiful (pulcherrima) little beast, without the poisonous tail and without those ugly scales; for these were added after sin,” and LW 1:186, “From this some obvious conclusions follow: that before sin the serpent was a most beautiful (pulcherrima) little animal and most pleasing to man, as little mules, sheep, and puppies are today.”
112 LW 1:90.
the way we handle puppies. Both the loveliness and the quality of the
fruits he used as food were also far superior to what they are now.113

Even his body smelled delightful: “Before sin Adam had the clearest eyes, the most
delicate and delightful odor, and a body very well suited and obedient for procreation.
But how our limbs today lack that vigor!”114 Luther’s prelapsarian Adam stands at the
pinnacle of creation, a perfect and beautiful human creature.

2.2.4) Damaged Beauty in “Fallen Nature”

The original beauty of creation did not last, however, and now our limbs “lack the
glorv” of Adam’s prelapsarian state. In the first five chapters of his Lectures on Genesis
alone, Luther refers to the fall in more than a dozen places.115 Through the fall, humans
lost “a most beautifully enlightened reason and a will in agreement with the Word and
will of God,” Luther writes. “We have also lost the glory of our bodies, so that now it is a
matter of the utmost disgrace to be seen naked, whereas that time it was something most
beautiful and the unique prerogative of the human race over all the other animals.”116
Moreover, our nature is no longer perfect; we now have natural defects:

Let us rather maintain that righteousness was not a gift which came from
without, separate from man’s nature, but that is was truly part of his
nature, so that it was Adam’s nature to love God, to believe God, to know
God, etc. These things were just as natural for Adam as it is natural for the
eyes to receive light. But because you may correctly say that nature has
been damaged if you render an eye defective by inflicting a wound, so,

113 Ibid., 1:62.
114 Ibid., 1:100.
115 See “Fall” and “Adam’s Fall” in the Index of LW 1:368.
116 Ibid., 1:141.
after man has fallen from righteousness into sin, it is correct and truthful to say that our natural endowments are not perfect but are corrupted by sin. For just as it is the nature of the eye to see, so it was the nature of reason and will in Adam to know God, to trust God, and to fear God. Since it is a fact that this has now been, who is so foolish as to say that our natural endowments are still perfect?117

In this section, Luther claims that the fall affected “nature” profoundly.118 “This nature of ours,” he writes, “has become so misshapen through sin, so depraved and utterly corrupted, that it cannot recognize God or comprehend His nature without a covering.”119 Human beings are now subject to death and compelled to meet with “great dangers” in “this wretched nature,”120 which was “planted by Satan and by original sin.”121 This “wicked and sinful nature”122 is “deformed” and “perverted” in the worst way possible.123 The *imago Dei*, which was once pure and perfect, has now been tarnished.124 Luther even mocks those who claim that sin did not impair our natural endowments, such as our reason.125 To sum up the contrast between the state of human beings before and after the fall, Luther writes: “In this way a very beautiful and very accurate picture of original righteousness can be inferred from the deprivation which we now feel in our own

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117 Ibid., 1:165.
118 Luther uses the term “fallen nature” explicitly in LW 1:339.
119 Ibid., 1:11.
120 Ibid., 1:63.
121 Ibid., 1:161.
122 Ibid., 1:108.
123 Ibid., 1:187.
124 Ibid., 1:90, “Our adversaries today maintain the foolish position that the image and similitude of God remain even in a wicked person. To me their statement would appear to be far more correct if they said that the image of God in man disappeared after sin in the same way the original world and Paradise disappeared.”
125 Ibid., 1:142.
We can infer the full beauty of God’s original creation by reflecting on our current deprivation of it.

Yet human sin not only damages the nature of the human being—it causes the natural world to fall too: “Now, when man is different on account of sin, the world, too, has begun to be different; that is, the fall of man was followed by the depravation and the curse of the creation.” Now “the entire creation in all its parts reminds us of the curse that was inflicted because of sin.” Even the rivers are now “misshapen” (a word that will feature prominently in later chapters) compared to their prelapsarian glory:

The Nile indeed exists to this day, also the Ganges; but, as Vergil says about Troy after its destruction: “And the field where Troy once was.” If anyone had seen the Nile and the other rivers in their first state and beauty, he would have seen far different ones. Now not only is their source not the same, or their state, but not even their course is the same. In the same way also all the other creatures have become misshapen and corrupted. For this reason St. Peter says in Acts 3:21: “The heaven must receive Christ until the time of the restitution of all things.” He indicates, as Paul also says (Rom. 8:20), that the entire creation has been subjected to vanity and that we hope for the restitution of all things, not only of man but of the heaven, the earth, the sun, the moon, etc. And so my answer regarding this passage is that the Nile, the Ganges, and the rest of the rivers are still in existence, but not such as they were. Not only were their sources thrown into disorder, but they themselves have been changed. Thus man still has feet, eyes, and ears the way each part was created in Paradise; but after sin these very members have been most wretchedly corrupted and misshapen.

The serpent is likewise included in this comprehensive fall of nature:

It was a most beautiful (pulcherrima) little animal; otherwise Eve would not have conversed with it so calmly. However, after sin it was not only the beauty (pulchritudo) of the serpent that was changed—for God
threatens that it will creep on the earth, while previously it lives on the better fruits (Gen. 3:14)—but also that freedom from fear has been lost, for we flee from serpents just as the serpents, in turn, flee from us. These wounds of nature were inflicted on account of sin, just as we have lost our nakedness, our upright will, and our sound intellect.\textsuperscript{130}

Luther speaks so often and so passionately of the “wounds of nature” that one might assume that he thinks that sin destroyed all beauty in creation, whether human or non-human. Fortunately, however, that would be a mistaken assumption.

2.2.5) Remaining Beauty in “Fallen Nature”

The damage sin inflicted on the original beauty of creation does prevent Luther from adopting a common medieval position called “pancalism,” which claims that all things (\textit{pan}) are beautiful (\textit{kalos}).\textsuperscript{131} God is pure beauty, and because he created all things, so the syllogism goes, all things participate in that beauty to one extent or another. This position would align neatly with Luther’s conception of creation’s original beauty, but “Luther cannot affirm this view of beauty as it stands, and this is where he distinguishes himself from his predecessors.”\textsuperscript{132} After all, “sinful creatures are apt to claim matters like goodness or beauty (and freedom too)—which properly are names or traits belonging to God and not to creatures—for themselves.”\textsuperscript{133}

In his doctrine of fallen nature, then, Luther occupies some sort of middle ground between “pancalism” and “a-calism” (the latter being the idea that the world is

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 1:151-152.  
\textsuperscript{131} For Mattes’ discussion of Luther’s relationship to pancalism, see Mattes, 111-112.  
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 1:111.  
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
completely devoid of beauty). In the first place, we should note that, for Luther, nature still has enough integrity to be read like a book (*Das Buch der Natur*).\textsuperscript{134} Luther’s repeated invocation of this term shows that, contrary to common perception, Luther did not reject Greek metaphysics or aesthetics wholesale. Indeed, it is especially in the context of fallen nature that Luther embraces elements of Pythagorean and Platonic aesthetics. Luther was “terrified of disorder,”\textsuperscript{135} as Anttila puts it, and the beauty of numerical order represented for him “a sure indication of the stability of God in a shifting and unstable world.”\textsuperscript{136} This is why, in the philosophical section of his *Heidelberg Disputations*, we find Luther naming Pythagoras and Plato and praising them for their mathematical achievements: “The mathematical order of material things is ingeniously maintained by Pythagoras, but more ingenious is the interaction of ideas maintained by Plato.”\textsuperscript{137} Where Luther diverges from Platonic aesthetics is not over the question of natural order; it is over the question of moral righteousness. For while Plato might consider his own thought more intellectually sophisticated than that of others (and

\begin{footnotes}

\footnote{Anttila, 8.}

\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, in LW 31:42. We should also note that Luther claims that “no one can deny” that the mathematical disciplines were “divinely revealed,” in LW 1:46.}
\end{footnotes}
therefore more beautiful in his own tripartite schema of society and soul), Luther would find this sort of pride exceedingly ugly.\(^\text{138}\)

Yet Luther’s theology of nature goes much further in an aesthetic direction than this, as Richard Strier makes clear: “Again and again, Luther is recorded as exhorting his interlocutors to consider and wonder at the most ordinary phenomena and processes of nature.”\(^\text{139}\) For example, Luther claims that “even after sin, we see what great virtues are inherent even in the smallest herbs and seeds.”\(^\text{140}\) When describing the effects of a sunrise, he waxes proto-Romantic: “I can’t understand what must be in a man’s mind,” he says, “if he doesn’t feel seriously that there is a God when he sees the sun rise.”\(^\text{141}\) Even in this fallen state, we can appreciate the beauty of seemingly unattractive animals like mice and flies:

> Therefore the mouse, too, is a divine creature and, in my judgment, of a watery nature and, as it were, a land bird; otherwise it would have the form of a monster, and its kind would not be preserved. But for its kind it has a very beautiful form (formam pulcherrimam), such pretty feet and such delicate hair that it is clear that it was created by the Word of God with a definite plan in view. Therefore here, too, we admire God’s creation and workmanship. The same thing may be said about flies.\(^\text{142}\)

Luther uses even more animal imagery to describe the difference between beauty before and after the fall: “we enjoy all this (created world) to overflowing, yet without

\(^{138}\) For Plato, the three parts of the soul (the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive) are only in proper order when the rational part rules the spirited and appetitive parts. From Luther’s perspective, however, the ability to achieve this proper order can potentially lead to pride (perhaps even someone designating themselves beautiful on this account).


\(^{140}\) LW 1:93.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., 54:73.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 1:52.
understanding, like cattle or other beasts trampling the most beautiful blossoms and lilies underfoot.”  The aesthetic image is clear: in the fallen natural world, human beings are unaware of just how much divine beauty still surrounds them.

2.2.6) The Beauty of Christ and the Cross

One of the most distinctive features of Luther’s theology of beauty is the stress he placed on the person of Christ, and especially on the salvation that is enacted in Christ’s crucifixion, resurrection, and eventual eschatological fulfilment. For Luther, “it is Christ alone who is truly beautiful.”  Even in Christ’s infancy, Luther calls him a “beautiful child” multiple times.  He was not necessarily physically beautiful, but in spiritual terms he is the most beautiful of all human creatures.  In particular, it is Christ’s response to human sin that Luther finds so beautiful. Christ, like an artist who makes a beautiful new pot out of old pieces, becomes a human being in order to absorb human sinfulness and renew its beautiful divine image.  Christ becomes ugly so that sinful human beings might become beautiful, and this constitutes what Luther calls the sinner’s “happy exchange” (der frohliche Wechsel). Accordingly, just as the entire cosmos fell on

143 Ibid., 54:327.
144 Mattes, 96.
145 Luther’s hymn “Vom Himmel Hoch” asks “who is the beautiful child?” (wes ist das schöne Kindelein?), and Luther calls him “a beautiful child” (ein schönes Kind) in the hymn “Sie ist mir Lieb,” as we will also see in the next chapter (3.2.6).
146 LW 12:207, “It could perhaps be that some were fairer in form than Christ, for we do not read that the Jews especially admired His form. We are not concerned here with His natural and essential form, but with His spiritual form. That is such that He is simply the fairest in form among the sons of men, so that finally He alone is finely formed and beautiful.”
147 Steiger, 128-129.
account of the “old Adam” and his sin, so too will the entire cosmos be raised to glory on account of the “new Adam” and his absorption of sin. Let us now analyze Luther’s Christological aesthetics in more detail.

As we saw above,\textsuperscript{148} Luther’s theology of beauty begins with the creation of the world through the Word, Jesus Christ. After that world falls away from its original beauty because of human sin, it needs something or someone to rescue it and restore that beauty. Thus God initiates a salvific plan by calling a people named Israel and promising them a Messiah. From this theo-dramatic position, various Jewish writers point toward that Messiah and cry out for him, and Luther repeatedly calls the Christological action these writings describe beautiful.

In various places in his commentary on the Psalms, for example, Luther sees prefigurations of Christ and calls them beautiful. Although Luther rejected aspects of medieval exegesis and its typically fourfold allegorical senses (the \textit{quadriga}), he did not expunge allegorical interpretation altogether – he focused it on Christ. Take, for example, the way Luther treats the aesthetic language of Psalm 45. The Psalm itself was apparently written for a king on his wedding day, and its sensual language reflects such an occasion.\textsuperscript{149} For Luther, the literal sense of this psalm describes beauty \textit{coram mundo}, the attractive splendor of worldly things. However, Luther also sees an allegorical opportunity to describe beauty \textit{coram deo}, the beauty of the \textit{divine} king:

\begin{quote}
This King is hidden under the opposite appearance: in spirit He is more beautiful than the sons of men; but in the flesh all the sons of men are
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{148} See 2.2.3.

\textsuperscript{149} See, for example, how the writer describes the woman’s beauty in verse 8: “your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia,” and verse 13: “The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes.” Psalm 45, NRSV.
more beautiful than He, and only this King is ugly, as He is described in Isaiah 53:2, 3… Therefore we see that delightful and pleasant things are stated of this King in the Psalm, but they are enveloped and overshadowed by the external form of the cross. The world does not possess or admire these gifts; rather it persecutes them because it does not believe. These things are spoken to us, however, to let us know that we have such a king. All men are damned. Their beauty is nothing in God’s eyes. Their righteousness is sin. Their strength is nothing either. All we do, think, and say by ourselves is damnable and deserving of eternal death. We must be conformed to the image of this King.150

Here Luther links Psalm 45 with a “suffering servant” song (Isaiah 53) to define divinely kingly beauty as Christ’s willingness to become ugly and suffer on behalf of sinful humanity.

This is only one small example, however, of Luther calling Jewish prophecies about the Messiah “beautiful.” In one of his Epiphany sermons, Luther again calls a psalm about prophecy beautiful: “In this connection, we are reminded of the beautiful sayings (schönen Sprüche) of the prophets,” he writes before quoting Psalm 27:14, a text about waiting for the Lord.151 In another Epiphany sermon, he claims that Micah’s prophecy foretells of Christ with “inimitable beauty,”152 and in his “Second Sermon for the New Year,” he calls one of Isaiah’s predictions “beautiful.”153 In a sermon from the first Sunday in Advent, Luther expounds on the beauty of Jewish prophecy: “The Jews had many beautiful and glorious (schöne und herrliche) promises concerning the Messiah or Christ, how He should appear on earth, establish an everlasting kingdom, redeem His

150 LW 12:208-209.
151 Luther, Dr. Martin Luther’s House-Postil, vol. 1., (Columbus: Schulze and Gassman, 1871), 250.
152 Ibid., 200. “Besides the narrative, we have in our Gospel lesson to notice especially the prophecy of Micah, which portraits Christ with inimitable beauty (schönen und gewaltigen).”
153 Ibid., 191, “The beautiful prediction (die schöne Menssagung) of Isaiah, Chapter 9:16.”
people from all evil, and help them forever; as we see in all the writings of the prophets, that they speak beyond measure gloriously concerning the future kingdom of Christ.”

Christ will become incarnate, Luther argues, and his “redemption of His people from all evil” will reveal his true beauty.

As mentioned above, Luther refers to the infant incarnate Christ as beautiful many times. Yet although his worldly stature is small, Luther claims in a Christmas sermon that Christ is more beautiful than all of creation: “Now the Son of God is greater, more beautiful (schöner), nobler and worthier than the sun and the moon and all the world with its possessions.”

Even Christ’s very mundane human needs are beautiful according to Luther: “In the occurrence in our Gospel we find not only these beautiful (schöne) and comfortable lessons, but we also see Christ as a real, natural man, who has body and soul, and who is in need of food and drink, of sleep and other requirements of our nature, so far as they are free from sin.”

As Christ grows older, preaches, and is eventually persecuted, the beauty of Jewish prophecy increasingly unfolds; the one through whom the world was created will suffer on its behalf.

Here, on the cross, is the core of Luther’s theology of beauty. Following the text of Matthew 26:36-46, which recounts events leading up to the crucifixion, Luther immediately preaches the following: “This is a beautiful narrative, and it presents the beginning of the sufferings of our Lord Jesus.” The narrative is beautiful because soon Christ will display the highest beauty by becoming the lowest ugliness. He therefore

154 Ibid., 1.
155 Ibid., 115.
156 Ibid., 265.
157 Ibid., 347, “Das ist eine sehr treffliche Historie und der rechte Anfang der Historie vom Leiden unsers Herrn Christi.”
subverts worldly standards of beauty (like we saw in Psalm 45), which Mattes describes well:

As bearing human sin, Christ subverts the standard medieval criteria of proportion, brightness, and integrity. But because Christ assumes the consequences of sin and sin itself and takes it away, sinners through the “happy exchange” receive the beauty proper to Christ. Through the renewal effectuated by the word, humans receive creation as gift and are genuinely awakened to its beauty, similar to the beauty that God made it originally. As new creatures, believers’ desire is reoriented to desire what God desires.  

When human beings believe in this “happy exchange” and “desire to be conformed to the image of this King,” they receive the freely given gift of Christ’s proper beauty. Luther describes that proper beauty with evocative language himself:

The eye does not see Him arrayed in beauty (Schönheit) or wealth, but finds him ignominiously hanging there in misery and wretchedness. But if we look into His heart we shall discover ornaments so bright and treasures so rich that we can never thank Him for them sufficiently. He is adorned, in the first place, with that most sincere obedience in which He glorifies His Father by permitting Himself to be spit upon, scourged and tortured. In this life we cannot fully comprehend the glory of this ornament; still we can understand enough of it to know that all pearls and purple and gold are nothing beside it.  

Luther’s reference to “the eye” here is important; if we simply look at Christ “ignominiously hanging there in misery and wretchedness,” we can see only ugliness. But if we use the eyes of faith to “look into His heart,” we can see Christ’s misery and

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159 Luther, *Dr. Martin Luther’s House-Postil*, vol. 2, (Columbus: Schulze and Gassman, 1871), 219-220.
wretchedness as a sign of his beautiful love for all creation and his desire to consummate that love eschatologically. In sum, Luther considers the person and work of Jesus Christ to be the definition of Beauty, from his role in creation, to his crucifixion and resurrection, and ultimately to his eschatological return.

2.2.7) Eschatological Beauty After the Cross

After Christ dies, the Father rewards his obedience and raises him from the dead. For Luther, this moment is eschatologically beautiful:

Because of the ugly form (häsliche Gestalt) He had on earth Thou wilt dress Him preciously, so that He will be dressed, adorned, and crowned on all sides. Not only will He be beautiful (schön) in body and soul for His own person, full of eternal salvation, wisdom, power, and might, full of heavenly majesty and deity, so that all creatures will regard and adore Him; He will also be gloriously adorned and decorated with His Christians and believers on earth and with the elect angels in heaven, in this world and in the world to come.

Luther goes even further in this direction, even using the same aesthetic language he used about Christ being “more beautiful than the sun and moon” in the context of redeemed creatures: “You will always be strong and vigorous, healthy and happy, also brighter and more beautiful (schöner) than sun and moon, so that all the garments and the gold bedecking a king or emperor will be sheer dirt in comparison with us when we are

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160 For example, Luther claims that with the eyes of faith, the believer can see images of Christ’s death and resurrection in creation itself. See: Steiger, 127, section d) “Die Bildrede der Schöpfungsworte.”

161 LW 12:128.
A full detailing of Luther’s references to eschatological beauty would stretch far beyond the bounds of this chapter, but because of the importance of the concepts of nature and music to this study, let us look at a couple more. In his “Second Sunday in Advent” sermon, Luther uses a wonderful juxtaposition of seasonal imagery to describe the beauty of the end times: “For this wretched life on earth is like the unfruitful winter when everything dries up, dies and decays. But it shall then have an end, and the beautiful (schöne), eternal summer shall come, namely the kingdom of God, by which the kingdom of the devil shall be destroyed, on account of which you have had to suffer so much in this world.” Moreover, although the end times might seem threatening, Luther advises Christians to look at the prospect in the light of Christ’s beauty: “Thus also will it be with us at the last day, should we live to see it. It will be terrible to behold when the heavens and the earth begin to be wrapped in flame; but a Christian must not look at the

162 LW 28:142.
163 Ibid., 53:234.
164 Ibid., 28:143.
165 Luther, House-Postil, vol. 1, 151.
166 Ibid., 31.
appearance; but hear how Christ explains it; namely, that it is a beautiful (schöne) blossom, a young, thrifty branch.”\textsuperscript{167}

For Luther, Christians live in the time between Christ’s ascension and his return. This means that Christians should participate in Christ’s sufferings: “Whoever makes himself beautiful is made ugly,” Luther writes. “On the contrary,” he continues, “he who makes himself ugly, is made beautiful.”\textsuperscript{168} Human beings cannot justify themselves; such is the ugly expression of sinful pride. Human beings can only turn to Christ and accept the free gift of justification he offers; such is belief in Christ and the subsequent transfer of his beauty to humanity. Accordingly, human beings can express that beauty by suffering for the sake of others, just as Christ did.

In this theo-dramatic chapter, Christians endure reproaches as they await the return of their beautiful savior: “These reproaches she (the church) endures; they are her beautiful precious stones which she wears on earth, her jewels and golden chain. These are her gems and her most beautiful and precious jewels (schöne Edelstein), with which God adorns her in this life.”\textsuperscript{169} This does not mean, however, that Christians should despair. Indeed, Luther reminds Christians that the beauty of Christ’s resurrection is cause for another activity, one we will explore in much more depth in the next chapter: “A Christian, however, has comfort and happiness in Christ in proportion to the faith wherewith he contemplates this scene of the resurrection; he views Christ no longer bloody and wounded, but in all His beauty (Schönheit) and loveliness. For as He formerly, on account of our sins, was bleeding and crucified, so He now has, for our

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{168} Mattes, 93.
\textsuperscript{169} LW 6:147.
consolation, an eternal life, full of happiness and joy. Let us therefore be glad and sing; all this has happened on our behalf.”

It should now be clear that those who have considered Luther an anti-aesthetic figure have not paid close enough attention to his Christology. As we have seen, Luther consistently and repeatedly refers to Christ’s life and work as beautiful, from the dramatic stages of creation to Israel to cross to church to eschaton. To be sure, Luther subjects all philosophical notions of beauty to a radical Christological evaluation, and those critiques have (perhaps understandably) given rise to his reputation as an anti-aesthetic figure. Nevertheless, Luther did not lay waste to all forms of philosophical aesthetics, as evidenced by his embrace of elements of the Platonic and Pythagorean systems. He could lodge those systems within his doctrine of creation (through Christ), thereby laying the foundation for his historically unprecedented theology of music.

2.2.8) Distinctive Emphases in Luther’s Aesthetics

In conclusion, Luther’s conception of beauty stands out from most others (especially purely philosophical conceptions) because of its radical Christological focus. For Luther, the world was created beautiful because it was created through Jesus Christ, who is supreme beauty himself. Through the sin of Adam and Eve, that world then fell from its perfect, pre-Edenic beauty. Some of the original beauty of creation remained, but the fall damaged creation so profoundly that it required a savior for its redemption. After the fall, the human will had become so misshapen that it could attempt to justify itself

170 Luther, *House-Postil*, vol. 1, 278.
and declare itself beautiful; for Luther, this is actually the definition of sinful ugliness.

Post-lapsarian humanity, according to Luther, desperately needs help.

Accordingly, God initiated a plan to help humanity (and ultimately all of creation) by calling Israel to be his chosen people. Luther repeatedly refers to Israel’s longing for a savior – especially in the Psalms – as “beautiful,” because such expressions of longing display their need for God, their lack of sinful pride. Eventually, according to Luther, that savior becomes incarnate in the form of Jesus Christ. He empties himself of pride, chooses to become ugly, and sacrifices himself on the cross for the sake of humanity and all of creation. That self-emptying, for Luther, is truly beautiful. The father honors Christ’s obedient sacrifice and raises him from the dead, confirming with resurrection power that loving sacrifice and humility – not pride – is beautiful. Christians are then enjoined to imitate Christ’s beautiful model, to spread his gospel message and to patiently bear their own sufferings until Christ returns in eschatological victory over evil once and for all.

One of the main reasons Luther’s conception of beauty is so distinctive is that he neither wholly embraces nor wholly rejects the classical definitions of beauty: order,

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As Jeremy Begbie describes, human beings are still free to reject Christ and remain ugly: “Christ’s beauty is evident in his compassion for the lost, his solidarity with the outcast, the miserable, and despicable. This divinely rooted beauty will not be patent to all. Far from it. It is hidden under its opposite (sub contraria species), and requires new eyes to see and fresh ears to hear. Christ appears ugly to those without faith – not only in the obvious sense that the crucified Christ is unattractive, but in the sense that as such he is an affront to human self-righteousness, to the belief that we have no need of saving, to the tendency to see ourselves as beautiful and on that basis attempt to secure some kind of standing with God. To those who insist on turning in on themselves, Christ will always be an offense. By contrast, Christ will be perceived as beautiful to those who, transformed by the Gospel, see in this crucified figure the living God meeting them in their ugliness, something they could never earn nor deserve.” Jeremy Begbie, “An Awkward Witness in a Worded World: Reflections on Music and the Reformation,” unpublished, 8.
proportion, brightness et al. As we will see more clearly in the next chapter, Luther actually embraced those aesthetic criteria in his musical thought. He could do so because he grounded music so deeply in his doctrine of creation through Christ that musical order reflects divine order in a post-lapsarian world of disordered chaos. In that sense, Luther embraced “classical aesthetics.” Yet Luther was also keenly aware of how morally dangerous appeals to aesthetic excellence can be. A talented musician (such as Bach) could easily turn their divinely given abilities into a platform for self-aggrandizement: “I am more beautiful because I can write harmony better than others” would be, according to Luther, an ugly expression of musical talent.

Such expressions of pride fail to recognize the damaging effects of the fall on human nature, yet the fall did not only damage human nature; it damaged the entire cosmos, all of nature. Accordingly, Luther’s conception of beauty differs from “classical aesthetics” in another way: Luther believed that natural disorder was redeemable through Christ. This means that dissonance, for example, did not have to be jettisoned in order for a musical work to be beautiful. In fact, if a musical work could display the overcoming of disorder (dissonance) by order (consonance), then that work might be even more beautiful than a purely ordered work. A purely ordered work can express the beauty of Eden, but only a work in which order overcomes disorder can express the beauty of the New Jerusalem. We are getting ahead of ourselves here, however, and before we properly delve into Lutheran musical aesthetics, we must examine the character of Lutheran aesthetics between the time of Luther and Bach.

2.3.1) Aesthetics in the Lutheran Tradition Before Bach
As we have seen above, Martin Luther wrote much more about beauty (and much more coherently) than many contemporary theologians have assumed, and he consistently focuses his aesthetic thought on the person and work of Christ. In this section, I will also show that Luther’s aesthetic thought filtered down through other figures into what I am calling “the Lutheran tradition before Bach.” I will not be defining the idea of “tradition” in any narrow sense here; I am using the word because the figures we are examining are both relevant to Bach and developed their thought in relation to Luther’s works (and the works of other later Lutherans). As such, they serve as linking points between the time of Luther and the time of Bach. For example, Johann Arndt developed his thought in the immediate wake of Luther’s life; he then taught Johann Gerhard, who developed his own thought in light of both Luther and Arndt. Likewise, to take another example, Abraham Calov (1612-1686) wrote commentaries on Luther’s work, and he also taught August Pfeiffer. These representative examples are only a small sampling of all the interactions among Lutheran theologians, ministers, poets, and musicians in the wake of Luther’s life and work. To be sure, none of these figures adopted Luther’s thought slavishly; one can find differences of emphasis and even occasional disagreement with Luther himself. Nevertheless, these figures upheld the broad outlines of Luther’s aesthetic thought, in both its theological and musical dimensions.

2.3.2) Beauty in Johann Arndt’s *Wahres Christentum*
Johann Arndt (1555-1621) was born less than a decade after Luther died, and in many ways became one of the most important Lutheran theologians of that era. As with Luther, Arndt was heavily influenced by medieval mystical writings, not least the *Theologia Germanica* that Luther edited as a young theologian.\(^{172}\) Arndt fuses this mystical tradition with new Lutheran doctrinal emphases in his famous book (or set of six books) *True Christianity (Sechs Bücher vom wahren Christentum)*, which made a massive impact both inside and outside the established Lutheran church.\(^{173}\) Long before “The Orthodox” and “The Pietists” were seen as two distinct and potentially competing groups, Arndt articulated the importance of devotional feeling within the framework of an emerging Lutheran orthodoxy. He also apparently picked up on many aesthetic dimensions of Luther’s theology, which we will observe below.\(^{174}\)

I am not using Arndt’s aesthetic texts to claim that he was a strict follower of Luther, nor am I necessarily claiming anything about the ways in which Arndt was used by other Lutheran figures who came after him (some of whom may have influenced Bach).\(^{175}\) I am using his aesthetic texts to show that he retained the Christological core of Luther’s account, promoted many aspects of Luther’s aesthetics, and to further secure the aesthetic link from Luther to Bach through the presence of *True Christianity* in Bach’s

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\(^{172}\) Arndt even reedited Luther’s edition, which became highly influential in the Pietist movement. See: Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (Chestnut Ridge: Crossroad, 2005), 393.


\(^{174}\) Almost all references to beauty in this section will be linked to various forms of the German word “Schönheit” in order to preserve the textual correspondence (as much as possible) from Luther, through figures like Arndt, and into texts associated with Bach.

\(^{175}\) On this, see, for example: Hans Schneider, *Der Fremde Arndt: Studien zu Leben, Werk, und Wirkung Johann Arndts* (1555-1621) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2006).
In order to secure this aesthetic link as tightly as linguistically possible, I will be focusing almost exclusively on texts in which Arndt uses the word “Schönheit” or cognates thereof. I am not arguing that these are the only points of commonality between Arndt and Luther. In fact, the understanding of beauty in Arndt’s *True Christianity* (in its various theo-dramatic stages) tracks quite well with Luther’s. If elements of Luther’s full theo-drama are left out here, it is not because Arndt deviated from Luther in some significant way; it is because I am staying tethered to forms of the word “Schönheit” as it moves in time and place from Luther to Bach.

There are at least three thematic loci in *True Christianity* that both extend Luther’s aesthetic thought and are relevant to the broader argument of this study: the original beauty of creation (and especially the creation of light and human beings), the beauty of nature even in its fallen state, and the beauty of Christ and his salvific work on the cross. Within each locus, we even find common aesthetic detail between the two figures, such as their aesthetic use of bride/bridegroom imagery, and their insistence that Christ is more beautiful than anything beautiful in nature.

2.3.3) Arndt on the Beauty of Creation

Like Luther, Arndt states unequivocally and repeatedly that God’s original creation, prior to the fall, was purely beautiful. In particular, Arndt follows Luther in focusing on the beauty of the image of God in human beings, which was undefiled prior to sin: “Hence God originally created man perfectly pure and undefiled; that so the divine

\[176\textit{NBR, 254.}\]
image might be beheld in him, not as an empty, lifeless shadow in a glass, but as a true
and living image of the invisible God, and as the likeness of his inward, hidden, and
unutterable beauty.”\footnote{Arndt, Book 1, Chapter 1, Paragraph 4. “\textit{und seiner überaus schönen, innerlichen und
verborgenen Gestalt.”}}\footnote{Ibid., 1, 41, 7.} He follows Luther’s example even more closely when he adopts
the language of proportion and bodily vigor to describe this prelapsarian beauty:

But as the image of God shone forth in the soul, so the image of the soul
again shone forth in and from the body. This, therefore, was holy, chaste,
and pure throughout, not subject to any unclean motion or lust. It was
undefiled and without blemish. It was in every respect, beautiful (\textit{s\öhn}),
well proportioned, and graceful; of vigorous health, and possessed of a
constitution even out of the very danger of sickness.\footnote{Ibid., 1, 41, 7.}

Yet not only was the human being perfectly beautiful prior to the fall. Just as we saw in
Luther, Arndt calls the divine creation of light beautiful dozens of times, even devoting
an entire chapter to the subject.\footnote{Ibid., 4, 1, 1, “\textit{Von dem ersten Tagewerk Gottes, dem Licht.”}}\footnote{Ibid., 4, Part 1, 4, 50.} Light is “the highest ornament and beauty (\textit{Schönheit})
of all things,”\footnote{Ibid., 4, Part 1, 4, 50.} and “we naturally take pleasure in the outward light as the most beautiful
object (\textit{als die schönste Kreatur}) in the creation.”\footnote{Ibid., 4, Part 1, 4, 50.} This beautiful light proceeds directly
from the sun, which reminds us of its creation through the eternal light of Christ: “The
sun serves thee as an unwearied servant, which every morning rises early, and carries
before thee the beautiful light (\textit{s\öhne Fackel}), and puts thee in remembrance of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[\footnote{Arndt, Book 1, Chapter 1, Paragraph 4. “\textit{und seiner überaus schönen, innerlichen und
verborgenen Gestalt.”}}] Original German text will be provided when the grammar of the
English translation does not allow for parenthetical citation (of forms of “\textit{Schönheit}”).
\item[\footnote{Ibid., 1, 41, 7.}]\item[\footnote{Ibid., 4, 1, 1, “\textit{Von dem ersten Tagewerk Gottes, dem Licht.”}}] Take, for example, the
title of Paragraph 4: “\textit{Das Licht zeuget 1. von Gottes Wesen, dass er das schönste Licht
set,”} or the first line of Paragraph 10: “\textit{Das Licht wendet alle Dinge zu sich durch seinen
Glanz und Schönheit.”}
\item[\footnote{Ibid., 4, Part 1, 4, 50.}]\item[\footnote{Ibid., 4, 1, 4, 57.}]
\end{footnotes}
eternal light, which is Christ, and his divine word." Arndt goes on to explain the relationship between the beauty of created and uncreated light:

The sun, moon, and stars, are witnesses of the divine goodness, and of that eternal light which enlightens, comforts, and refreshes every man that cometh into the world. For as God is in himself invisible and incomprehensible, we should, by the direction of the natural light, aspire to the knowledge of Him that made it; and by the beauty of the created (den schönen natürlichen Lichtern), be drawn to the love of the uncreated light. And as we naturally take pleasure in the outward light, as the most beautiful (schöne) object in the creation; so ought we, with our whole hearts, to love Him who is light eternal, and to walk and rejoice in his light, by withdrawing ourselves from the darkness of sin.

Given the “darkness of sin” that damages humanity and all of creation, one might assume that the postlapsarian world lost all of its beauty. That would not, however, be the case.

2.3.4) Arndt on Beauty in Fallen Nature

As we also saw in Luther’s work, Arndt claims that beauty can be perceived even after the introduction of sin into the world:

So, if we should see the spotless beauty (Schönheit) of the original human body (der schönen Gestalt des menschlichen Leibes), we should easily judge of the beauty of its divine inhabitant. Even now, in this corrupt and depraved state of nature, we see what attractive charms there are in beauty (Schönheit). Moreover, we may judge yet farther of the beauty (Schönheit) of human nature, by the glories of the place in which God at first placed man; which was Paradise itself, a garden full of joy and celestial pleasures, infinitely exceeding all the glory and beauty (Schönheit) of the present world. For if the place were so glorious, what must the owner of it be, for whose sake it was created?

182 Ibid., 2, 29, 5.
183 Ibid., 4, 1, 4, 29.
184 Ibid., 4, 1, 6, 18.
Arndt explains this situation in more detail, focusing (as we might expect) on the lasting presence of beautiful light in nature. Unlike in sections cited above, where Arndt speculates about beauty in the prelapsarian world, here he describes beauty in our postlapsarian state: “For even the sun, the moon, and all the host of heaven, when they give their light, bear witness at the same time to the majesty and goodness of Him that made them. The earth praises God when it is fruitful and flourishing. The herbs and flowers, by their fragrance, beauty (Schönheit), and variety of colors, show forth the might and wisdom of their Maker.”185 Other natural things, even things that do not emit light, are likewise beautiful: “I come next to the mountains,” Arndt writes, “which by their height and beauty (hohen schönen Bergen) are no small ornament to the earth.”186 We also read about the beauty (Schön) of “fountains, fields, flowers, trees, fruits, and woods, yea, and all the glittering brightness of heaven, the sun, moon, and stars.”187 Yet Arndt does not simply list these natural things for their own aesthetic sake; he wants to use their beauty to highlight a higher form of beauty.

These beautiful natural things “are not to be compared with the native and original excellence of man for whose sake and benefit they were all created.”188 The beauty of the entire natural world, it seems, was created for human happiness: “Thus the sweetness and goodness of the water, the fragrance and beauty of flowers, the light and glory of the sun, moon, and all the host of heaven, yield no pleasure to themselves, but all

185 Ibid., 2, 42, 14.
186 Ibid., 1, 3, 21.
187 Ibid., 4, 1, 6, 17.
188 Ibid.
unite to promote the happiness of man.”

Indeed, Arndt goes so far as to draw up an instructive analogy between natural beauty and human moral health:

As a flower, that in sight, taste, and smell, is sweet and beautiful (schön), is rejected with disgust, if it contain secret venom, because it is hurtful to man; so, though a man be adorned with the most exquisite parts, and the very gifts (schöne Gaben) of angels themselves, if he be void of charity, and full of avarice, pride, self-love, and self-honor, then all those gifts not only prove of no value, but become pernicious to him that possesses them. For whatever is really good, always proceeds from God himself, so as to begin and end in him.

Arndt does not invent the idea of natural beauty serving as a model for human moral health; indeed, the idea comes from the one through whom that nature was created, Christ himself: “And they will also assent to the Saviour’s own method of teaching, who used to explain and demonstrate to his disciples and followers the mysteries of his kingdom and of true Christianity, by beautiful illustrations (tröstliche Gleichnisse) taken from the book of nature.”

Or again, in the same vein: “The beautiful parables (schönen Gleichnisse) derived from nature, as the grain of wheat, in John 12:24, claim attention. The apostle says: “Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened except it die,” etc. 1 Cor. 15:36, etc.”

Nature ultimately serves for humanity’s benefit, since the redemption of humanity through Christ is its highest beauty: “It cannot be doubted that (human beings) are the most beautiful of all creatures (die schönste Kreatur),” Arndt claims, “since the Son of God himself does not disdain to betroth himself unto them, and to adorn them

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189 Ibid., 4, 2, 7, 2.
190 Ibid., 1, 31, 3.
191 Ibid., 4, Preface, 3.
192 Ibid., 2, 57, 10.
with his own light and beauty.”\footnote{Ibid., 4, 1, 6, 22.} Let us now analyze Arndt’s Christological aesthetics in more detail.

### 2.3.5) Arndt on the Beauty of Christ

Like Luther, Arndt places the life and work of Christ at the center of his aesthetic understanding. He calls Christ “the noblest beauty (die edelste Schönheit),”\footnote{Ibid., preface to the second book, 3.} who is “infinite in his beauty (Schönheit), loveliness, and glory.”\footnote{Ibid., 2, 26, 10, 5.} He is “so lovely and beautiful (schön und lieblich), as infinitely to transcend all the beauty (Schönheit) and loveliness of the world. He is the beauty of all things beautiful (aller schönen Dinge Schönheit), and the loveliness of all things lovely, the life of all the living.”\footnote{Ibid.} True Christianity is filled to the brim with references to the beauty of Christ, with entire chapters and paragraphs devoted to the subject. Take, for example, this opening paragraph from a chapter entitled “Showing How God Manifests Himself To The Loving Soul, As The Supreme Beauty”:

As nothing is more lovely to a loving soul than Christ, and no good higher or more precious than God himself; so there is also nothing more beautiful (nichts Schöners) in the sight of such a one than God. That soul looks upon God as the highest beauty (die höchste Schönheit), with which nothing in heaven and earth is to be compared; so that all the holy angels cannot sufficiently praise to all eternity this beauty of God (Schönheit Gottes). If all the holy angels in their lustre, and all the elect in their glory, were put together, it would nevertheless appear, that all their beauty (Schönheit) and splendor proceed from God, who is the eternal glory and beauty (Schönheit); and that they are derived from the everlasting, infinite
light and brightness. For as God is all good, and the highest good, so He is also all beauty (Schönheit), ornament, and glory.\textsuperscript{197}

As we saw with Luther, Arndt claims that this beautiful light of Christ shines even in the midst of fallen nature, which gives Greek philosophers like Plato some limited awareness of Christ’s beauty:

The wise heathen Plato, considering the beauty (Schönheit) of the creatures, of the luminaries, of the firmament, of the flowers in the fields, of the metals and animals, has by this reason drawn the conclusion, that God must of necessity be an eternal Being, beautiful above all things (übersaus schönes Wesen sein), because the beauty (Schönheit) of all the creatures must be comprehended or concentrated in Him. But we say from the word of God, and the holy Evangelist St. John: “It doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know, that when He shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2); that we then, being perfectly renewed after the likeness of God, shall really be an image, like unto God, through which his beauty (Schönheit), brightness, and glory will shine; but out of Jesus Christ our Lord, in the highest brightness and beauty (Schönheit) of all.\textsuperscript{198}

Moreover, the beauty of virtue comes not from a philosophical notion of “the morning star,” but from the beautiful morning star himself, Jesus Christ:

The most eminent of them, such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, have highly recommended the study of virtue, and freely confessed, that “if virtue could be seen with bodily eyes, it would appear fairer, and with a more glorious lustre than even the morning star.” But, truly, none have had a fuller view of the beauty (Schönheit) of virtue, than those who by faith have seen Jesus Christ, that unerring pattern of righteousness. These are those that have “handled the Word of life” (1 John 1:1), as St. John tells us. And, surely, if heathens have been so much absorbed by the love of virtue, how much more should a Christian love the transcendent beauty (Schönheit) of Jesus Christ, who is virtue itself, and composed of nothing but pure love, and unspotted meekness; nay, who is God himself?\textsuperscript{199}

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 2, 30, 1.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 2, 31, 4.
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 1, 37, 11.
To describe the beauty of this “pure love,” Arndt draws on a familiar Lutheran image that Bach would later set to music many times: the bridegroom, Christ, sacrificing for his bride, the church. “How great must that beauty, how rich must that attire, how transcendent must those ornaments be,” Arndt asks, “which so great and noble a spouse can bestow upon the bride which he has prepared for himself?”200 Christ bestows that beauty on his bridegroom by sacrificing himself on the cross and enacting the “happy exchange” described by Luther above, by becoming ugly on the cross so that humanity can become beautiful: “Thus the Strongest became weak; the Almighty infirm; the most Glorious, became most despicable; the most Beautiful (*allerschönste*), most abhorred and hated; the most Exalted, most exposed himself to temptations of all kinds, to sufferings and difficulties, to pains and hardships.”201 And just as we saw in Luther’s writings, this cruciform expression of love has an eschatological dimension, which we can glimpse in this life:

That love is a beautiful image (*schönes Bild*) and a foretaste of eternal life; when the saints shall love each other sincerely; when they shall delight in one another, and converse together with wonderful and ineffable concord, in an inexpressible sweetness, in unfeigned affection, cheerfulness, and joy. Whoever, therefore, would conceive to himself an image of that marvellous love and harmony, and obtain some foretaste of the exquisite pleasures of the eternal beatitude, let him study this love, in which he will find a singular pleasure, with much peace and tranquillity of mind.202

200 Ibid., 4, 1, 6, 24. “*Was werden das für schöne Edelgesteine sein, für Kleinodien, für goldene Kronen, welche so ein gewaltiger, herrlicher, reicher und schöner Bräutigam seiner Braut gibt? O der wunderbaren Gnade und Freundlichkeit Gottes gegen unsere Seele! O der großen Schönheit!*”
201 Ibid., 2, 13, 7.
202 Ibid., 1, 26, 11.
In this section, I have adduced just a limited number of examples of Lutheran aesthetic influence in Arndt’s *True Christianity*; many more could be added. It should be clear, at this point, that Arndt retained the broad outlines of Luther’s own aesthetic thought, and that his work serves as an aesthetic linking point between Luther and Bach. Yet this line of aesthetic thought descending from Luther does not terminate in the work of Arndt; indeed, one of his most prolific students also carried it forward and (as with Arndt) into Bach’s personal library.

### 2.3.6) Christological Beauty in the Work of Johann Gerhard

As a young man, Johann Gerhard (1582-1637) came under the influence of Johann Arndt, who would eventually become his pastor and theological mentor. Like Arndt, Gerhard wrote devotional works within the context of an emerging Lutheran Orthodoxy, generations before such works would be directly associated with the Pietist movement. Despite the fact that Gerhard sought to save Arndt’s work from its pietistic pitfalls, he did apparently pick up certain Lutheran aesthetic emphases from Arndt, which we find expressed in works like *Schola Pietatis* (which Bach owned), and *Meditationes Sacrae*. Because of this aesthetic similarity, and simply because the total references to beauty in Gerhard are of a smaller number, this section will not be as long as the previous one on Arndt.

In *Meditationes Sacrae*, for example, Gerhard uses aesthetic language to describe Christ in a variety of places. In particular, his thirteenth meditation reflects a key

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203 *Schola Pietatis* has not, according to Gerhard scholar Johann Anselm Steiger, been translated into English (private conversation, Hamburg University, October 2018).
emphasis of Luther’s aesthetics (found also in Arndt): the spiritual marriage of the soul with Christ. Christians should “rejoice because of the surpassing beauty (speciosus forma) of thy Spouse.” Christ’s “beauty (pulchritudo) is the very greatest; for His form is fairer than the children of men.” Yet Christ expresses his beauty not by rejecting sinners; rather, he expresses his beautiful love by embracing them, even to the point of dying on the cross so their ugliness can become beautiful:

How wonderful then His mercy, that, though He is the perfection of beauty (pulchritudo), He does not disdain to choose for His spiritual bride the soul of the sinner, all stained and defiled with sin though it be. Here is the height of majesty in the Bridegroom and the depth of lowliness in the bride; surpassing beauty (pulchritudo) in the Bridegroom, forbidding deformity in the bride; and yet greater is the Bridegroom’s love towards His bride than hers towards her most majestic and most beautiful (pulcherrimum) Spouse.

The culmination of that nuptial relationship, Gerhard makes clear, is the beatific vision of God found in heaven, achieved through Christ’s death and resurrection, which he again describes in aesthetic terms:

To see God—ah! That will surpass all the joys of earth. To gaze on the face of Christ, to live with Christ, to hear the voice of Christ, will far exceed the most ardent desires of our hearts. O Lord Jesus, Thou most blessed Spouse of my soul, when wilt Thou bring my soul into Thy royal palace as Thine honored bride? What can I want there that Thou wilt not supply? What more can we desire or look for when God Himself shall be all in all (1 Cor. xv. 28)? Oh, that will be as beauty (pulchritudo) to my sight, honey to my taste, music to my ear, balm to my nostrils, and a flower to my touch.

205 Ibid., 71-72.
206 Ibid., 72.
207 Ibid., chapter 47, 275.
As an Orthodox Lutheran theologian, it makes perfect sense that he would follow Luther in describing the beauty of Christ in eschatological terms. It also makes sense that he would include music in this description, and as we will now see, he and Arndt were far from the only ones to do so.

2.4.1) Summary: Lutheran Aesthetics Between Luther and Bach

The goal of the first chapter was to present an account of Bachian aesthetics from both a theoretical and practical perspective. The goal of this chapter has been to provide an explanatory backdrop for that chapter by outlining the aesthetic understanding of Luther and showing that two of his followers whose books Bach personally owned – Johann Arndt and Johann Gerhard – carried forward key elements of Luther’s aesthetics. In particular, I have sought to show that in the major stages of biblical Theo-drama, Luther has consistently referred to Christ’s activity as beautiful. Pre-lapsarian creation, according to Luther, was created through Christ and was perfectly beautiful. After the fall of creation, however, such beauty remained, but now in fallen form. Both human and non-human creation became “misshapen,” Luther puts it, through the sin of Adam and Eve. In order to redeem that fallen creation, Christ assumed its human form and suffered its worst punishment on the cross. Such an ugly death reveals God’s beautiful love for creation, according to Luther, and we actively await his eschatological return by imitating such self-less love toward others.
Luther’s understanding of beauty did not die with him, however, and many of his followers – such as Arndt and Gerhard – carried key elements of it forward. Yet when we continue to survey the aesthetic landscape between Luther and Bach, we start noticing other places where the idea of beauty (especially as it relates to the use of cognates of the word “Schönheit” specifically) appears: texts set to music and texts about music. As we saw in chapter one, such texts come from figures like the Lutheran theologian and administrator August Pfeiffer (1640-1698), the Lutheran poet and dramatist Johann Rist (1607-1667), the Lutheran poet and pastor Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608), the Lutheran theologian and hymnist Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676), the Lutheran politician and hymnist Johann Franck (1618-1677), the Lutheran entomologist and hymnist Christian Friedrich Richter (1676-1711), the Lutheran jurist and poet Gottfried Wilhelm Sacer (1635-1699), and the Lutheran minister and poet Bartholomäus Crasselius (1667-1724). Moreover, many of these figures used cognates of “Schönheit” in other Christological hymns, such as Paul Gerhardt’s “Wie schön ist’s doch, Herr Jesu Christ,” Johann Rist’s hymn “Ermunter Dich” in which he asks “the most beautiful” Christ to come into his heart (Komm, Schönster, in mein Herz hinein), and Johann Franck’s “Herr Jesu, Licht der Heiden,” in which he extends Simeon’s Nunc Dimittis to all believers as “the beautiful swan song” of death (Herr, laß uns auch gelingen, // daß letzt, wie Simeon // ein jeder Christ kann singen // den schönen Schwanenton: // Mir werden nun in Frieden // mein Augen zugerückt, // nachdem ich schon hienen // den Heiland hab erblickt.)

To this list, we can also add the hymn “Schönster Herr Jesu,” an anonymous seventeenth-century text that appears in a variety of Lutheran hymnals and would eventually become the popular English hymn “Beautiful Savior,” or “Fairest Lord Jesus.”
The Lutheran poet Salomon Franck (1659-1725) should also be mentioned in this connection, whose “Hymn Before Holy Communion” employs the aesthetic language of Song of Songs to address Christ: “My beauty, must I wait longer? // Lead me into your garden, // Come and refresh me with apples, // Endow me with flowers. // I am sick from love and desire, // Come to me, most glorious beauty! // Jewel and splendour of my soul, // Come, Lord Jesus, my desire.” Moreover, the Lutheran theologian Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714), who wrote the texts for BWV 504 and 505, uses forms of the word “Schönheit” theologically many times in his work. One of his hymns addresses Christ directly as “Mein Liebster, Mein Schönster,” but his hymn “Wie schön ist unsers Königs Braut” echoes Luther’s aesthetic theology more clearly. In it, he adopts bride/bridegroom imagery to show that the church is beautiful when it sings of its bridegroom’s triumph (Wie schön ist unsers Königs Braut, // Wenn man sie nur von ferne schaut; // Wie wird sie nicht so herrlich seyn, // So bald sie völlig bricht herein? // Triumph! wir sehen dich, wir singen dir! // Wohl dem, der dich empfängt, du Himmels-Zier). Furthermore, Johann Jacob Rambach (1693-1735), whose works appear several times in Bach’s theological library, echoes the aesthetic language of Luther’s Lectures on Genesis in his hymn “O unaussprechlicher Verlust, Den wir erlitten haben!” In it, he writes that the “first beauty” of human beings was lost through the serpent’s poison (Der fluch trift alle sündner. // Die erste Schönheit ist dahin: // Der Schlange gift hat leib und sinn // Durchdrungen und verwüstet.). Finally, in a text that describes the structure of Bach’s oratorios well, we find

the Lutheran librettist Christian Friedrich Hunold (1680-1721) describing the beauty of the oratorio: “An oratorio is an exceptionally beautiful genre; it is primarily used for sacred subjects and for pieces composed for the church. In short, it is structured thus: a biblical text alternates with arias. Sometimes are added one or a couple stanzas from a chorale.”

With all of this data, we should ask: why did the specific word used for beauty in the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate – “Schönheit” – appear in so many Lutheran musical texts between the time of Luther and Bach? Perhaps because it was so closely identified with the Reformer’s theology of music itself, both in his own writings and those of his closest musical advisor, Johann Walter (1496-1570).

One of Luther’s close friends and his partner in musical affairs, Walter used the word “Schönheit” in a Christological context many times. His hymn “Herzlich thut mich erfreuen” refers to the eschaton as the beautiful summer time when God will make all things new, just as Luther did in his sermons (Herzlich thut mich erfreuen // die liebe Sommer-Zeit, // wenn Gott wird schön verneuen // alles zur Ewigkeit.) Walter continues this theme, using either “schön” or “Schönheit” another four times to describe the beauty of the eschaton. In the last usage, he even writes that we will sing “a completely beautiful new song” to God on his seat and throne (Wir werden stets mit Schalle // vor Gottes Stuhl und Thron, // mit Freuden singen alle // ein neues Lied gar schön). Furthermore, in his 1564 poem Lob und Preis der himmlischen Kunst Musica, Walter refers to the beauty of a

\[209\] Quoted in Rathey, 90. “Eine Oratoria ist eine vortrefflich schöne Art, und vornehmlich wird sie uns in geistlichen Sachen und Kirchen-Stücken contentiren. Sie ist aber kürzlich also beschaffen, dass ein Biblischer Text und Arien unter einander gewechselt werden. Bisweilen tut man auch ein ode rein Paar Gesetze (stanzas) aus einem Choral Gesang dazu.”
well-voiced symphony. However, an even more intriguing use of the word comes from his translation of Luther’s *Encomium Musices*. According to Walter Blankenburg, whose study of the textual transmission of Luther’s *Encomium* remains authoritative today, three versions of the preface exist. Luther first wrote a short German draft, followed by an expanded published Latin version that heightens the aesthetic language of the original. Walter, in 1564, then published his own German translation of Luther’s expanded Latin one. The final paragraph reads thus:


211 For a more detailed explanation of the textual transmission history of Luther’s *Encomium Musices*, see: Robin Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 2007), 11-12.

212 I have quoted the German text to highlight the fact that Walter used the word “Schönheit” in his translation of Luther’s Latin version, but here I add an English translation from Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, appendix 3, for reader clarity: “But the subject is much too great for me briefly to describe all its benefits. And you, my young friend, let this noble, wholesome, and cheerful creation of God be commended to you. By it you may escape shameful desires and bad company. At the same time you may by this creation accustom yourself to recognize and praise the Creator. Take special care
This translation project forced Walter to translate several aesthetic terms from Latin into German, such as “pulcherrima” and “iuncundissimae.” What are the words he chose? “Allerschönste” and “allerschönsten.” Here we have someone who worked with Luther on a regular musical basis, who published the first Lutheran songbook (Eyn geystlich Gesangk Buchleyn) in tandem with him, and whose chorales form the foundation of the Lutheran musical tradition. When he needed to find a German word to reflect Luther’s understanding of musical beauty, he chose the very one that lies at the heart of the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate and this study in general: “Schönheit.”

to shun perverted minds who prostitute this lovely gift of nature and of art with their erotic rantings; and be quite assured that none but the devil goads them on to defy their very nature which would and should praise God its Maker with this gift, so that these bastards purloin the gift of God and use it to worship the foe of God, the enemy of nature and of this lovely art. Farewell in the Lord.”
Chapter 3: The Role of Music in Lutheran Aesthetics

“But such speculations on the infinite wisdom of God, shown in this single part of his creation, we shall leave to better men with more time on their hands. We have hardly touched on them.”

- Martin Luther, *Encomium Musices*

3.1.1) Introduction

One of the central claims of this dissertation is that Bach read Luther’s *Encomium Musices* and used “the time on his hands” to explore “the infinite wisdom of God” shown in “this single part of his creation”: music. And while I certainly cannot claim to be a “better man” than either of them, I have used “the time on my hands” to explore this line of influence in aesthetic terms. In order to trace that line more clearly, this chapter will examine how Luther’s (and post-Luther Lutherans’) understanding of musical beauty “fits,” or perhaps even “nestles,” into the broader aesthetic outline shown in the last chapter. This methodology is critical because, as we shall see, Luther conceived of music as a theological reality all the way down; for him, there is no such thing as “musical aesthetics” conceived independently of “theological aesthetics.” Accordingly, I have retained much of the theo-dramatic structure from chapter two, which should display the role of musical aesthetics in Luther’s overarching theological aesthetics in an organized way. At the end of this chapter, then, I will be able to move to chapter four, in which I

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offer a re-reading of the first chapter (Bach’s aesthetics) in light of the last two (Lutheran aesthetics and the role of music therein).

3.2.1) The Role of Music in Lutheran Aesthetics

This section will unfold in two parts: First, I will show not only that music fits into Luther’s broader theological aesthetics but how it does so. In particular, we will see that music plays a role in the entire theo-dramatic sweep of Lutheran aesthetics, from creation to incarnation to eschaton. At the same time, we will also see that Luther was acutely aware of where he stood in that theo-drama, and that this ecclesial position led him to endorse a rather specific musical aesthetic, namely an “aesthetics of Christological light.” Second, in order to tie the aesthetic link from Luther to Bach more tightly, I will show that members of what Eric Chafe calls “the Lutheran ‘metaphysical’ tradition in music and music theory” carried forth Luther’s musical theology and detailed it further than Luther himself could. For instance, we find the Lutheran pastor and musician Andreas Werckmeister delving much deeper into the musical phenomenon of dissonance than Luther ever did. The “space” for a theory of dissonance is available in Luther’s aesthetic outline, but it took the work of later Lutherans to explain it in musico-theoretical terms. Werckmeister proposed no dramatic changes to Luther’s aesthetic theology (if any), but he did expound on aspects of it, such as the status of music as a numerically ordered divine creation.

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214 Chafe, Analyzing Bach Cantatas, Chapter 2.
3.2.2) The Role of Music in Martin Luther’s Aesthetics

Before Luther, instrumental music aroused grave suspicion in many quarters of the church, not least in the work of Luther’s great mentor St. Augustine, who asserted: “Yet when it befalls me to be more moved with the voice than the words sung, I confess to have sinned penally, and then had rather not hear the music.”\textsuperscript{215} Almost one thousand years later, we find Thomas Aquinas citing that very same passage to explain why music should not be used to “provoke pleasure.”\textsuperscript{216} Indeed, throughout that question of the \textit{Summa}, Aquinas downplays the theological importance of instrumental music in the Old Testament,\textsuperscript{217} assumes an oppositional relationship between musical pleasure and “a good disposition,”\textsuperscript{218} and ranks singing below teaching and preaching in his ordering of proper devotion arousal.\textsuperscript{219} In addition to Augustine and Aquinas, we can add (at least) Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and Clement of Alexandria to the list of pre-Luther

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{216} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae}, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Canton: Pinnacle Press, 2017), II-IIae, Question 91, Reply to Objection 2: “Jerome does not absolutely condemn singing, but reproves those who sing theatrically in church not in order to arouse devotion, but in order to show off, or to provoke pleasure. Hence Augustine says (Confess. x, 33): ‘When it befalls me to be more moved by the voice than by the words sung, I confess to have sinned penally, and then had rather not hear the singer.’”
\item \textsuperscript{217} Ibid., “On the Old Testament instruments of this description were employed, both because the people were more coarse and carnal—so that they needed to be aroused by such instruments as also by earthly promises—and because these material instruments were figures of something else.”
\item \textsuperscript{218} Ibid., “For such like musical instruments move the soul to pleasure rather than create a good disposition within it.”
\item \textsuperscript{219} Ibid., “To arouse men to devotion by teaching and preaching is a more excellent way than by singing.”
\end{itemize}
theologians who rejected the use of instrumental music in worship.\textsuperscript{220} Moreover, in the 1320s, Pope John XXII banished polyphony from the liturgy and released a bull (\textit{Docta Sanctorum Patrum}) warning of the dangers of such musical development.

Against this historical backdrop, many (if not most) of Luther’s statements about pure music appear to be theologically unprecedented. This is neither to say that Augustine and Aquinas rejected music wholesale (they certainly did not), nor that Luther always praised music unreservedly (he also did not). It is to say, however, that at the time of Luther no Christian theologian had dared to raise music to the level he did. “Next to theology,” he famously wrote, “music deserves the highest praise.”\textsuperscript{221} For Luther, the pleasant and delightful aspects of music should not be feared as instigators of potential sin; music instead produces an “innocent delight” in its hearers.\textsuperscript{222} For him, moreover, the musical notes are not just crutches for the weak or unhelpful distractions from the text; they “make the text alive.”\textsuperscript{223} Indeed, music could apparently send Luther into the throes of mystical ecstasy, where he could hardly find words to describe the divine beauty he experienced.\textsuperscript{224}

\textsuperscript{220} On the role of music in the early church, see Calvin R. Stapert, \textit{A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church} (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2006) and James McKinnon, \textit{Music in Early Christian Literature} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For more detail on the contrast between the figures discussed above and Luther’s conception of church music, see Joyce L. Irwin, \textit{Foretastes of Heaven in Lutheran Church Music Tradition} (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), xxv-xxviii.

\textsuperscript{221} LW 53:323.

\textsuperscript{222} “quia innocens gaudium facit,” WA 35:483.

\textsuperscript{223} WA No. 2545b.

\textsuperscript{224} “I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God which it is and to commend it to everyone. But I am so overwhelmed by the diversity and magnitude of its virtue and benefits that I can find neither beginning nor end nor method for my discourse. As much as I want to commend it, my praise is bound to be wanting and inadequate.” LW 55:321-322.
Painting a full and coherent picture of Luther’s theology of music is no simple task, however, and approaching it from the angle of beauty threatens to complicate matters further. Luther never finished the full treatise on music he intended, and without it, scholars are left to piece his scattered and occasional thoughts together as coherently as possible. Among the many attempts to do so, some of the more influential have been Oskar Söhngen’s *Theologie der Musik*, Hubert Guicharrousse’s *Les Musiques de Luther*, and Robin Leaver’s *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, probably the most thorough and authoritative book on the topic to date. Joyce L. Irwin’s work, especially *Neither Voice nor Heart Alone: German Lutheran Theology of Music in the Age of Baroque* and *Foretastes of Heaven in Lutheran Church Music Tradition: Johann Mattheson and Christoph Raupach on Music in Time and Eternity*, has traced the development of Luther’s theology of music into the later baroque era, a pivotal time period for this study.

This chapter differs from all of those accounts in two specific ways: first, I am not intending to provide the sort of full and exhaustive Lutheran theology of music that many of the above studies did. Instead, like Anttila, I intend to focus on Luther’s theology of music from the perspective of beauty. Unlike Anttila, however, I intend to situate Luther’s musical reflections into the larger framework of his overarching theological

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225 For Robin Leaver’s analysis of Luther’s treatise and the fuller intended version, see Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 85-103.
228 Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*.
230 Anttila, *Luther’s Theology of Music*. 
aesthetics (chapter two). Mark Mattes devotes a chapter to musical beauty in his book on Lutheran aesthetics examined in chapter two, and this chapter could be viewed as an expanded version of it. But secondly, the crucial difference between this chapter and previous studies of Luther’s theology of music is that I am intentionally focusing on the elements of it that are clearly relevant to Bach. This chapter is not primarily about Luther himself; it is about the elements of Luther’s musical-aesthetic thought that apparently informed Bach.

This also means, then, that the important debates about what should or should not be considered “authentic” statements of Luther are basically immaterial to this chapter. For example, whether or not Luther actually said everything reported in the Tischreden hardly matters here. What matters is that these thoughts were presented to Bach as though Luther had actually said them. Bach was no historian of textual transmission, but he was apparently an avid reader of Luther and Lutheran theology. What we find in Bach’s personal library is fair game for explaining his own understanding of theology, music and beauty, whether Luther actually uttered every single word contained therein or not.

3.2.3) Music Created as “One of The Most Beautiful Gifts of God”

Because Luther did not explicitly thematize music in his Lectures on Genesis, it might seem as though he did not situate it in his doctrine of creation at all. Indeed, this is the sort of reasoning put forth by Joyce L. Irwin in Neither Voice nor Heart Alone, where

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231 Mattes, Luther’s Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal.
she argues that Luther’s musical reflections are so thin and scattered that most Lutheran scholarship has overemphasized the role of music in his theology.232 Yet Irwin’s claims have struggled to gain widespread acceptance in the field, in large part because Luther’s references to music are so rhetorically emphatic and touch on every stage of theodrama, from creation to eschaton.233 In this section, I will show that in his doctrine of creation, Luther situates music as a beautiful gift of God that, accordingly, possesses certain characteristics that make it “natural.”

For Luther, music is not just any created thing or any typical gift of God; it is “eine schöne und herrliche Gabe Gottes”234 and “eine der schönsten und herrlichsten Gaben Gottes.”235 Music is one of the most beautiful, most glorious, gifts of God. It is a “noble, wholesome, cheerful creation,”236 and Luther says he would “certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God which it is and to commend it to everyone.”237 Because of the beauty and excellence of this created gift, Christians may accustom themselves “to recognize and praise the Creator.”238

Accordingly, as something created by God and not simply made by humans, music has natural characteristics built-in by that Creator. “Looking at music itself,” Luther argues, “you will find that from the beginning of the world it has been instilled and implanted in all creatures, individually and collectively. For nothing is without sound or harmony. Even the air, which of itself is invisible and imperceptible to all our senses,

232 Irwin, Neither Voice nor Heart Alone.
234 WA No. 968; see also No. 3815.
235 WA No. 490.
236 LW 55:324.
238 Ibid., 55:324.
and which, since it lacks both voice and speech, is the least musical of all things, becomes sonorous, audible, and comprehensible when it is set in motion.” This is what Robin Leaver calls the “raw material” of music in Luther’s thought: “For Luther, music is a God-given benefit to humankind: it may be developed and refined in new ways, but the raw material of music – physical vibrations in the air, the proportions and relationships of different pitches, and so forth – is absolutely and fundamentally the gift of God in creation.” In what follows, I propose two such characteristics that make music “natural,” or “built into creation,” according to Luther: the divine creation of birdsong and music’s mathematical basis.

Birdsong clearly enchanted Luther, and in several places he articulated its Christological import. In his ode to “Frau Musica,” for example, he obliquely references the logos theology of John 1 when praising the song of the nightingale: “Thanks be first to God, our Lord // Who created [the nightingale] by his Word // To be his own beloved songstress // And of musica a mistress.” This language signals divine intent, and Luther further specifies that birdsong was created to have a language of its own, independent of human speech: “Therefore, we have so many hymns and Psalms where message and music join to move the listener’s soul, while in other living beings and [sounding] bodies music remains a language without words.” According to Luther, even King David, who lived long before Christ’s incarnation, could marvel at the presence of wordless birdsong in nature: “Music is still more wonderful in living things, especially birds,” he writes, “so that David, the most musical of all the kings and minstrel

239 Ibid.
240 Leaver, Luther’s Liturgical Music, 70.
242 Leaver, 317.
of God, in deepest wonder and spiritual exultation praised the astounding art and ease of
the song of birds when he said in Psalm 104:12: “By them the birds of the heaven have
their habitation; they sing among the branches.” Yet for Luther, birdsong is more than
just a wordless language created through the agency of Christ; it also somehow preaches
the gospel of Christ.

As Mattes puts it, according to Luther “singing birds are gospel preachers for true
Christians.” Luther makes this claim forthrightly in at least one place, developing a
wonderful culinary analogy in the process:

Whenever you listen to a nightingale, therefore, you are listening to an
excellent preacher. He exhorts you with his Gospel, not with mere simple
words but with a living deed and an example. He sings all night and
practically screams his lungs out. He is happier in the woods than cooped
up in a cage, where he has to be taken care of constantly and where he
rarely gets along very well or even stays alive. It is as if he were saying: “I
prefer to be in the Lord’s kitchen. He has made heaven and earth,” and He
Himself is the cook and the host. Every day He feeds and nourishes
innumerable little birds out of His hand. For He does not have merely a
bag full of grain, but heaven and earth.

Luther knows why the un-caged bird also sings: he is happy to be in nature, in “the
Lord’s kitchen.” And he preaches the gospel by singing all night and “practically
screaming his lungs out” with joy.

A second way in which music is “natural” for Luther is that it has its foundation
in mathematical order. Luther rightly refused to allow philosophy to make demands on
theology, but he also embraced philosophy that had been baptized, “washed” of its

243 Leaver, 315.
244 Mattes, Luther’s Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal, 161.
impurities.\textsuperscript{246} For example, Luther had no trouble endorsing elements of the philosophical theory of music espoused by Pythagoras and Plato. While their strict indexing of musical proportion to beauty requires such “baptismal washing,” Luther still retained elements of their theory in his doctrine of creation.

Take, for example, how Luther integrates the mathematical properties of music into his doctrine of creation: Music is “instilled and implanted in all creatures, individually and collectively,” as we saw above. “For nothing is without sound or harmony. Even the air which is invisible and imperceptible to all our senses, and which, since it lacks both voice and speech, is the least musical of all things, becomes sonorous, audible, and comprehensible when it is set in motion.”\textsuperscript{247} Commenting on the passage, Anttila makes the implied reference to Pythagoras explicit:

This passage reflects Luther at his nearest position to the Pythagorean theory of music. Literally, Luther states that nothing is without sound or “sounding number” (\textit{Nihil est sine sono, seu numero sonoro}), and this means that the connection between music and mathematics is essential. From this, some scholars have drawn the conclusion that Luther’s conception of music is Pythagorean. Regardless of its historical prominence, except for that single sentence, the \textit{harmony of the spheres} is conspicuous in its absence in Luther’s theology of music.\textsuperscript{248}

Anttila, however, is simply mistaken here; that is not the only sentence in which Luther presents a positive evaluation of Pythagoras and the “harmony of the spheres” tradition. He mentions it twice explicitly, again in the context of music, in his \textit{Lectures on Genesis}. The first example reads: “We do not marvel at the countless other gifts of creation, for we

\textsuperscript{246} “If, nevertheless, you wish these terms to be used, I ask first that they be well washed; get thee to a bath!” in Mattes, \textit{Luther’s Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal}, 16.
\textsuperscript{247} Leaver, \textit{Luther’s Liturgical Music}, 314.
\textsuperscript{248} Anttila, \textit{Luther’s Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure}, 85, italics original.
have become deaf toward what Pythagoras aptly terms this wonderful and most lovely music coming from the harmony of the motions that are in the celestial spheres.”

He then reiterates the same basic idea later: “And it is clear that the same thing is happening to us that Pythagoras told about the movement of the heavenly spheres, whether he had this from himself or from the fathers, namely, that these movements constantly produce the most delightful music, but that because of this constant repetition the minds and ears of mortals have become so numb that they no longer hear them.”

Both times, we should note, Luther references Pythagoras by name, refers to the “harmony of the spheres” explicitly, and uses aesthetic language in his description (wonderful and most lovely music,” and “the most delightful music).

Yet Luther endorses Pythagoras at least one other time, now connecting Pythagoras’ rather rudimentary music theory to Plato’s appropriation of it in a more developed form: “The mathematical order of material things is ingeniously maintained by Pythagoras,” he writes in the Heidelberg Disputation, “but more ingenious is the interaction of ideas maintained by Plato.”

For Luther, this is not a binary comparison; it is rather his approval of Plato’s extension of Pythagorean music theory into the realm of human ethics and emotion. From the cosmic harmonic claims of Pythagoras, Plato reasons that the human soul should likewise be ordered harmonically, thus attempting to use harmony as a linking concept between cosmic and human order. What Luther seems to have embraced in Plato’s music theory is the synthesis of mathematical cosmology (coming from Pythagoras) and human ethical activity (expressed in Plato’s own doctrine

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249 LW 1:126.
250 Ibid., 5:23.
251 Ibid., 31:42. We should also note that Luther claims that “no one can deny” that the mathematical disciplines were “divinely revealed.” LW 1:46.
of Ethos). Accordingly, for Luther, Plato represents an ancient bridge between what we now call “the hard sciences” and “the humanities,” which roughly correspond to the medieval “Quadrivium” and the “Trivium.” Luther did not exactly pull music out of the Quadrivium, as Renate Steiger claims; he merely extended it into the Trivium as well. The Titelkupfer of Lutheran hymnist Johann Crüger’s Synopsis Musica illustrates this point well, with Frau Musica playing a stringed instrument top and center, flanked by “Grammatica, Dialectica, and Rhetorica” on one side and “Arithmetic, Geometria, and Astrologia” on the other.

It is therefore dangerous to reduce Luther’s endorsement of the Platonic-Pythagorean tradition to the “Quadrivium” side of Crüger’s Titelkupfer, and thereby ignore the musical connections across (or perhaps above, given Lady Music’s visual position) the “Quadrivium” and the “Trivium.” And neither Anttila nor Mattes seem particularly aware of this expansive vision of Luther’s, how encompassing his embrace of the “harmony of the spheres” tradition really is.

In the first place, Anttila claims that “Luther refers incidentally to Pythagoras.” It is true that Luther never wrote a substantive analysis or treatise on Pythagoras, and that his references to Pythagoras are scattered throughout his writings. However, we should actually expect this from Luther for two reasons. First, Pythagoras himself did not leave a body of writings with which Luther could engage substantively; the (rather piecemeal)

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252 The medieval “Quadrivium” consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music, while the “Trivium” consisted of grammar, logic, and rhetoric.
255 Anttila, Luther’s Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure, 86.
thoughts of Pythagoras were passed on to Luther through the work of others. Second, Luther’s references to other important figures are likewise scattered throughout his writings. Luther was an extraordinarily eclectic thinker who often quoted various interlocutors briefly before moving on to other figures and topics.

Anttila also argues that “one may suppose that Luther does not deny there is a harmony of the spheres, but this is of little interest to him and does not relate to music.”\textsuperscript{256} This is an extremely bizarre claim to make, both because Luther explicitly refers to Pythagoras in musical reflections multiple times (see above), and because the Pythagorean “harmony of the spheres” tradition was focused on the relationship between mathematics and music. Moreover, Anttila seems to be unaware that Pythagoras’ music theory was based on both physics and philosophical speculation. “In this concise treatment of musical cosmology,” Anttila writes, “Luther moves swiftly on to a more concrete and, for him, meaningful connection – the dependence of music on physics. Compared to the speculative tradition, this is clearly a realistic trait.”\textsuperscript{257} But the entire “harmony of the spheres” tradition comes from a legend about Pythagoras’ interaction with and perception of the physical properties of sound, namely the simultaneous sounding of multiple hammers of different weights (or different lengths of plucked strings, depending on the strand of legend). He then speculated from there about its cosmic dimensions, namely the ratios of motion in planetary bodies. Finally, Antilla claims that Luther did not build his musical aesthetics on the Pythagorean grounds of proportion and harmony, arguing instead that he promoted an “aesthetics of light.”\textsuperscript{258}

\textsuperscript{256} Anttila, 86, italics original.
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 194.
This is an unnecessary bifurcation because a work of musical art can contain both ordered and disordered proportions (in Pythagorean terms), potentially creating the effect of light shining in the darkness. Indeed, this seems to be precisely Bach’s own conception, as we will see in the next chapter.

Mattes, like Anttila, aligns Luther very closely with the medieval thinkers Jean Gerson (1363-1429) and Johannes Tinctoris (1435-1511), who had recently attempted to reframe music as a practical art focused on emotional effect rather than a speculative art focused on Pythagorean science.\(^{259}\) The introductory clause of his section on Luther’s “Criteria for Beauty in Music” shows that Mattes assumes a fundamental opposition between the two: “With this new appreciation for music as affective and not cosmological....”\(^{260}\) As shown above, such a bifurcation is alien to Luther’s thought; a more accurate claim would add “and not just cosmological,” though that formulation would still ignore Luther’s embrace of Plato’s harmonic doctrine of Ethos. Furthermore, in this outlook, musical numerology and emotional effect are already deeply intertwined in any piece of music to the extent that the resolution of dissonance involves the changing of harmonic ratios. In the crudest Pythagorean terms, dissonant ratios can create a feeling of tension, or longing, that is then relieved by a shift to consonant ratios. Finally, Mattes opposes Pythagorean order with musical freedom, aligning Luther primarily with the latter:

The older Pythagorean and Augustinian approach highlighted order at the expense of freedom: it based beauty in music only on numerical ratios; it ignored the creative, unpredictable, surprising, and captivating element of harmonious exchange of the polyphony dancing around the cantus firmus.

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\(^{259}\) Mattes, 124-125.
\(^{260}\) Ibid., 126.
But this latter feature, in contrast, is exactly what Luther accentuated and delighted in. The simplicity or order to which Luther alludes is no longer defined by numerical ratio.\textsuperscript{261}

This is another false bifurcation. It is impossible to establish genuine polyphony without ordering the numerical ratios involved. The alternative to numerical ordering is not really “creative” or “surprising” polyphony; the alternative is cacophony. Polyphonic music \textit{requires} numerical ordering, and the “creative, unpredictable, surprising, and captivating elements” of it are generated by skillful composers who understand the numerical basis of musical sound well, even if only intuitively.

Therefore, we should reframe Luther’s endorsement of Pythagorean music theory to include proportion, light, and emotional effect together. Luther did situate the Pythagorean tradition into his doctrine of creation through Christ, so we should not be surprised that he also described musical nature as both proportionally ordered and disordered. Yet he also seemed to be aware that a musical artist could shine Christological light in music, which would presumably require the darkness created by dissonance. Finally, in Luther there is no principled contradiction between theoretical speculations about harmonic proportion/disproportion and the practice of generating emotional effect; indeed, they can work together in the form of harmonic resolution.

Because dissonance is disordered, it might seem, then, that there is no place for dissonance in Luther’s theology of music. And indeed, a purely dissonant work of music would be purely disordered in Luther’s terms. However, a fundamentally consonant work (one that begins and ends with consonance) that still contains dissonance achieves the opposite effect. In a work thus described, the composer shows that the disorder of

\textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 127.
dissonance is overcome by the order of consonance. The composer recognizes that disorder exists, and so introduces dissonance; yet the composer also introduces it in such a way that harmonic resolution is possible. In this way, music can take on immense theological weight; it can potentially make Christological redemption audible. But first, let us analyze the role of music in Luther’s theology of fallen nature.

3.2.4) Music in “Fallen Nature”

We recall, from chapter two, that Luther adhered to the “fall of nature” tradition in medieval theology, wherein it is claimed that the original sin of human beings corrupted the entire natural world as well. The nature of music would therefore be included in this universal claim, and throughout his writings Luther exhibits an awareness of musical nature’s “fallen-ness.” Here I highlight three particular ways in which “the fall” impacted music in Luther’s thought: the tendency of musicians to focus on their external works without associated internal faith, defects in human musical perception, and the phenomenon of musical dissonance.

First, and perhaps most importantly, any positive treatment of Luther’s theology of music must deal with the fact that he often criticizes merely external forms of musical activity. When music becomes a “work,” Luther criticizes it severely: “Therefore, let the works go, no matter how great they may be, prayers, chants, yammering, and yapping; for it is certain that nobody will ever get to God through all these things.” He ratchets up the rhetorical intensity even further in another place: “Reason… is as blind as a bat

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262 See 2.2.4.
263 LW 51:47.
and says that we must fast, pray, sing, and do the works of the law. It continues to fool around in this manner with works, until it has gone so far astray and thinks we serve God by building churches, ringing bells, burning incense, reciting by rote, singing, wearing hoods, having tonsures, burning candles, and by other countless foolish acts of which the world is full, indeed more than full.”\(^{264}\) External musical works cannot lead anyone to the true God, but they are especially bankrupt if they do not arise from an internal posture of prayer: “If now (as Paul says) some unbeliever were to enter into the midst of these men and heard them braying, mumbling, and bellowing, and saw that they were neither preaching nor praying, but rather, as their custom is, were sounding forth like those pipe organs… would this unbeliever not be perfectly justified in asking, “Have you gone mad?” What else are these monks but the tubes and pipes Paul referred to as giving no distinct note but rather blasting out into the air?”\(^{265}\) Luther reiterates this point elsewhere, with no less force: “These people utter this prayer with their lips, but contradict it with their hearts. They are like lead organ pipes which fairly drawl or shout out their sounds in church, yet lack both words and meaning.”\(^{266}\) True musical activity, for Luther, must arise freely from sincere internal faith.

A second aspect of music’s “fallen-ness” in Luther’s theology is his claim that there are defects in the human faculty of hearing. As we have seen in multiple places above, Luther refers to human beings’ inability to hear the full beauty of natural music, to their “deafness” to the “wonderful and most lovely,” the “most delightful,” music coming

\(^{264}\) LW 52:59.
\(^{265}\) LW 44:324.
\(^{266}\) Ibid.
from the harmony of the spheres.\textsuperscript{267} Luther attributes this deafness to the “continued recurrence” or “constant repetition” of music, thus arguing that human hearing loses its awareness of musical beauty through repeated exposure. Implicit in this claim is the idea that human beings could, and perhaps even did (before the fall), hear the full beauty of music even after much exposure. This idea will become more important later, especially in the context of the relationship between “artistic” and “natural” music, but a more pressing issue has yet to be discussed: the role of dissonance in Luther’s aesthetics.

While Luther never wrote a fully developed theory of dissonance, we can take some of his more scattered reflections on it and place them compellingly into the aesthetic scaffolding we are working with here. Consider, for example, the way in which Luther describes the relationship between artistic music and natural music in his \textit{Encomium Musices}: “But when [musical] learning is added to all this and artistic music which corrects, develops, and refines the natural music, then at last it is possible to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God’s absolute and perfect wisdom in this wondrous work of music.”\textsuperscript{268} What is it in “the natural music” that needs to be “corrected, developed, and refined” by artistic music? The fact that Luther follows this

\textsuperscript{267}Luther seems to like this idea, and expresses it in at least one other place, where he draws an aesthetic analogy between maternal breastfeeding and our deafness to “this lovely music of nature”: “Thus it is a great miracle that a small seed is planted and that out of it grows a very tall oak. But because these are daily occurrences, they have become of little importance, like the very process of our procreation. Surely it is most worthy of wonder that a woman receives semen, that this semen becomes thick and, as Job elegantly said (Job 10:10), is congealed and then is given shape and nourished until the fetus is ready for breathing air. When the fetus has been brought into the world by birth, no new nourishment appears, but a new way and method: from the two breasts, as from a fountain, there flows milk by which the baby is nourished. All these developments afford the fullest occasion for wonderment and are wholly beyond our understanding, but because of their continued recurrence they have come to be regarded as commonplace, and we have verily become deaf to this lovely music of nature.” LW 1:126.

\textsuperscript{268}LW 55:324.
statement up with an aesthetic celebration of polyphony suggests that it is precisely the phenomenon of dissonance that Luther has in mind. Without art, multiple voices singing simultaneously will inevitably clash with one another (as one might hear when many birds sing simultaneously); it is the task of the artist to mitigate that natural harshness by cultivating a pleasing harmony among the different voices. Luther uses a remarkably similar formulation in a letter to Johann Agricola, in which he describes the changes he made to an existing piece: “I chanced to find a piece of paper on which was written this old song arranged for three voices. I cleansed, corrected, and improved it, added a fourth voice, and also quickly prepared a text for the music.”

Here Luther has cast himself as the artist, who can amend natural dissonances by harmonizing them in multiple voices.

More specifically, Luther even displays an awareness of the possible dissonances created by adjustments between what we now call “whole-steps” and “half-steps,” or “major-second” and “minor-second” intervals. The overall focus of the following passage is on Luther’s analogy between law/gospel and written notation/performance, but the analogy only makes sense because of dissonance:

The Gospel is the same as a b fa (b-flat) b mi (b-sharp) as it is performed, the other pitches are the Law. And the same as the Law obeys the Gospel so must the written pieces submit to the b fa b mi. And in the same way that the Gospel is a lovely and gracious doctrine, so is the mi and fa the most beautiful in all voices. But the other tone [the Law] is a poor, weak sinner, which allows both b fa and b mi – mi and fa – to be sung.

The musicological description here can be tricky for modern readers to grasp, so Robin Leaver helpfully explains its import:

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269 Anttila, 94.
270 Leaver, 101.
Accidentals, indicating whether or not a note should be natural or flattened – common in modern scores – were not notated in sixteenth-century sources. Given their theoretical training in hexachordal solmization, late medieval and renaissance musicians were expected to know whether B-flat or B-natural was to be sounded, even though a simple B was notated on the page, rationalizing those pitches through *musica recta*, for example the B-flat of the soft hexachord on F, or through *musica ficta*, for accidentals not covered by the hexachordal system. This was a cultivated skill on the part of the singers and instrumentalists. As Luther said on one occasion, “a musician may sing the whole song before another discerns and discovers whether sol or fa [that is, a whole-step or half-step] is to be sounded in a key.” Thus with inexperienced performers it was quite possible that one sang (or played) a half-step at the same time as another sang a whole-step, resulting in an unpleasant dissonance.\(^{271}\)

The word “unpleasant” is significant here, because it suggests that “pleasant dissonances” are possible. Indeed, Luther tacitly endorses the use of dissonance in polyphonic composition when he celebrates the work of Josquin, whose sophisticated treatment of dissonance has even spawned a dissertation at Cornell University.\(^{272}\) One needs only to listen to the opening few bars of Josquin’s “*Miserere Mei, Deus*” to hear the dissonances he associated with sinful souls crying out to God for mercy, and the lasting popularity of that work suggests that its dissonances are somehow pleasing to certain listeners. The idea of “pleasing dissonance” played a role in chapter one and will return in the next chapter, but for now, let us continue with the role of music in the next stage of Luther’s aesthetic theo-drama.

In this section, I have shown that Luther believed that music, like all of nature, had fallen away from its original perfect beauty. Now, it can be used as an external adornment of human pride, the human aural faculty has been significantly damaged, and

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\(^{271}\) Ibid., 102.

the phenomenon of dissonance has been introduced into otherwise perfectly ordered musical nature. In order to redeem this fallen nature from its captivity to evil, God ultimately becomes incarnate in the most beautiful form possible: the person of Jesus Christ. But that incarnation comes through God’s chosen people – Israel – and it is to that chapter of Luther’s aesthetic theo-drama that we now turn.

3.2.5) Music Between “Fall” and “Incarnation”

So far, we have looked at how music plays a role in Luther’s aesthetics from two perspectives: his doctrine of creation and his doctrine of the fall. Now, we turn to the next chapter of the biblical theo-drama, which plays an important role in Luther’s aesthetics: Israel. After the fall, when humanity becomes estranged from God and creation, God initiates a dramatic plan to save it: he will call a people named “Israel” to follow him and will promise them a Messiah. Before that Messiah comes, however, the Israelites have to suffer through a number of travails. This suffering causes them to cry out in longing for divine assistance and to prophecy about their expected Messiah, which Luther repeatedly calls beautiful. These cries also often took the form of song (especially in the Psalms and in the book of Isaiah), so we should not be surprised to read Luther referring to these songs as beautiful.

Indeed, in Luther’s own vernacular translation of the Old Testament, he uses cognates of the word “Schönheit” repeatedly, and often in the context of musical beauty. In the Psalms, a collection of texts intended for singing, Luther translates chapter 27, verse 4 as “zu schauen die schönen Gottesdienste des Herrn” (to look upon the beautiful
worship services of the Lord). He translates Psalm 33:3 as “Singet ihm ein neues Lied; spielt schön auf den Saiten mit fröhlichem Schall” (Sing to him a new song; play beautifully upon the strings with joyful sound.) In Psalm 50, written for “der rechte Gottesdienst” (the proper worship service), Luther translates verse 2 as “Aus Zion bricht an der schöne Glanz Gottes” (Out of Zion breaks forth the beautiful shining of God). He translates the first line of Psalm 147 as follows: “Halleluja! Lobet den Herrn! Denn unsern Gott loben, das ist ein köstlich Ding, ihn loben ist lieblich und schön” (Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! For praising our God is a precious thing, to praise him is lovely and beautiful).

Luther also uses cognates of the word “Schönheit” to call the Psalms beautiful. In his Treatise on the Last Words of David, for example, he praises the effects of David’s “beautiful (schöne) Psalms”\textsuperscript{273} and “beautiful (schöne) sweet Psalms.”\textsuperscript{274} He elaborates further, making sure his reader understands that for David, both music and theology contribute to the beauty and sweetness of the Psalms:

When David uses the word sweet he is not thinking only of the sweetness and charm of the Psalms from a grammatical and musical point of view, of artistic and euphonious words, of melodious song and notes, of beautiful text and beautiful tune (Schöner text und Schöne noten); but he is referring much more to the theology they contain, to the spiritual meaning . . . The Book of Psalms is a sweet and delightful song because it sings and proclaims the Messiah even when a person does not sing the notes but merely recites and pronounces the words. And yet the music, or the notes, which are a wonderful creation and gift of God, help materially in this, especially when the people sing along and reverently participate.\textsuperscript{275}

\textsuperscript{273} LW 15:273.
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid., 15:273-274.
Yet Luther’s expressions of aesthetic appreciation of the Psalms are not confined to his treatise on David’s last words. He wrote an exposition of Psalm 118, which he entitled “Das schöne Confitemini, an der Zahl der 118. Psalm.” In his commentary on verse 29, he writes an oft-quoted passage on music: “We often sing a good song over again from the beginning, especially one we have sung with pleasure and joy.”276 Here we find a different sort of “repetition” than the one Luther repeatedly discussed in his writings on Pythagoras. Rather than claiming that the repetition of natural music renders human beings “deaf” to the fullness of its beauty, here Luther encourages the repetition of artistic music, almost as if the repetition of “good songs” is an intimation of Psalm 118’s first and final claim itself: that God’s love endures forever. And the full expression of that divine love, for Luther, comes in the beautiful form of Jesus Christ, whose incarnation the Psalmist and Isaiah prefigured.

3.2.6) The Beauty of Christ and Ecclesial Music

“With Jesus Christ a new age of music has been brought about,” Oskar Söhngen writes of Luther’s musical theology. “Whoever has been delivered from sin, death and the devil by God’s beloved Son ‘cannot refrain but must joyfully and with delight sing and say’… The Gospel calls for music!”277 But what type of music, one might ask of Luther, and are certain types more or less beautiful in light of Christ’s victory over “sin, death and the devil”? Moreover, if music has really entered “a new age” with the advent

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276 LW 14:105.
of Christ, how is it related to the “old age” of previous theo-dramatic stages (creation, fall, Israel)? In this section, I will show three things: first, that Luther uses aesthetic language to refer to Christ in his own musical work, that Luther believed that Christ’s victory over “death and the devil” did fundamentally change the nature of music itself, and finally, that Luther does provide certain broad aesthetic principles for Christian musical composition.

Luther was an active and capable musician, and in his musical activity in the church, he often used cognates of the word “Schönheit” to refer to Christ himself and music as one of his beautiful creations. Take, for example, the aesthetic language he uses in his incarnation hymns. The seventh stanza of “Vom Himmel Hoch” reads:

Merk auf, mein Herz, und sieh dorthin!
Was liegt dort in dem Krippelein?
Was ist das schöne Kindelein?
Es ist das liebe Jesulein.\textsuperscript{278}

In this hymn, Luther commands his heart to look up and see what lay in the little crib. Who is the beautiful little child it sees therein? The dear little Jesus. In a similar vein, in “Sie ist mir Lieb, die werte Magd” the second stanza reads:

\begin{quote}
Ihr ist weh und muss gebären
ein schönes Kind, den edlen Sohn
und aller Welt ein Herren,
dem sie ist unterton.\textsuperscript{279}
\end{quote}

Here Luther praises the “worthy maid,” who readers have interpreted as either Mary or the church itself. The Marian interpretation holds more weight, however, because of the

\textsuperscript{278} WA 35:459.
\textsuperscript{279} WA 35:462-463.
line involving the word “schönes.” The worthy maid “must bear” (muss gebären) that “beautiful child” (schönes Kind), and he is the noble son who will become Lord to the entire world.

In “Die Vorrede an der Sammlung der Begräbnislieder,” Luther’s 1542 preface to a collection of burial hymns, he uses forms of the word “Schönheit” to describe the difference between his aesthetics and the medieval version he inherited. “They have the most beautiful services, gorgeous cathedrals, and splendid cloisters,” he writes, “but the preaching and teaching that goes on inside is a blasphemy and for the most part serves not God but the devil.”280 Here Luther reiterates an aspect of the fall we also observed above: in our fallen state, human beings tend to ignore internal beauty (preaching and teaching that goes on inside) and instead fixate on external beauty (most beautiful services, gorgeous cathedrals, and splendid cloisters). For Luther, only forms of external beauty that arise from the internal beauty of faith constitute true beauty. Yet Luther does not dispense with the idea of beautiful worship altogether; he merely corrects the medieval version of it. In the next paragraph, he explains his stance more specifically:

And indeed, they also possess a lot of splendid, beautiful songs and music, especially in the cathedral and parish churches. But these are used to adorn all sorts of impure and idolatrous texts. Therefore, we have unclothed these idolatrous, lifeless, and foolish texts, and divested them of their beautiful music. We have put this music on the living and holy Word of God in order to sing, praise, and honor it. We want the beautiful art of music to be properly used to serve her dear Creator and his Christians. He is thereby praised and honored and we are made better and stronger in faith when his holy Word is impressed on our hearts by sweet music.281

280 LW 53:327.
281 Ibid., 53:328.
Strikingly, Luther has no concerns here about the nature of the music itself; it is “splendid” and “beautiful” regardless of its textual association. Luther simply wants to jettison the “impure and idolatrous” texts and replace them with “the living and holy Word of God.” This wedding of beautiful music and divine Word makes us “better and stronger in faith” – better than either could do on their own, and certainly better than the empty external beauty of medieval worship.

Having shown that Luther refers to both Christ himself and music itself as “beautiful” within the context of his own ecclesial activity, let us examine more closely Luther’s theological rationale for doing so. In particular, we should recall, from the previous chapter, that Luther repeatedly calls Christ’s cruciform redemption of the fallen cosmos “beautiful.” This theo-dramatic action bears aesthetic consequences for music and its use in the church, as we will see below.

In the first place, Luther claims that music can align itself with the aesthetic dimension of Christ’s crucifixion by “driving away the devil.” Indeed, “the devil, the creator of saddening care and disquieting worries, takes flight at the sound of music almost as he takes flight from the word of theology.” Christ’s victory over the devil cannot be achieved by music, for that would be heresy. But Luther does seem to be saying that music, as ‘one of the most beautiful gifts of God,’ can be an effective instrument in cooperating with, or perhaps even participating in, Christ’s beautiful banishment of the devil from the human soul.

Secondly, Christ’s redemption of creation affects the way Christians should view its fallen aspects, such as musical dissonance. “As bearing human sin,” Mattes writes of

282 Leaver, 86.
283 LW 49:428.
Luther’s Christology, “Christ subverts the standard medieval criteria of proportion, brightness, and integrity.” On the cross, Christ bears human sin and thus absorbs into himself the disproportion and darkness of the world. For someone like Luther, who expressed his awareness of Pythagorean music theory in so many ways, “musical disproportion” would necessarily include the phenomenon of dissonance. While consonant proportions like 2:1 and 3:2 reflect divine order in that scheme, the dissonances of many other disproportional ratios reflect the very brokenness Christ came to redeem. This is perhaps why Mark S. Sooy has claimed that Luther “may have also recognized a representation of the fall in the dissonant aspects of music, which add tension and disharmony to it and cry for resolution (i.e., redemption?).” Sooy offers no citation for this claim, and it appears that Luther never expressed it in such a clear and coherent way. However, within the theological framework we have been working with here, it makes perfect sense. One of the ways music beautifully “drives the devil away” is by displaying the victory of consonance over dissonance in artistic form. Thus we are now hinting at one of the most important claims of this dissertation: that Luther provided Bach with the theological warrant for his expansive use of dissonance. For Luther implies (if not states explicitly) that there is an analogy between the beauty of Christ’s redemption of creation and the beauty of a musical artwork in which dissonance is “redeemed” by consonant resolution. And the more dissonance resolved, the further away the devil must flee.

284 Mattes, “Martin Luther’s Theological Aesthetics.”
285 Mark S. Sooy, Essays on Martin Luther’s Theology of Music (Book Locker: 2006), 34.
286 Consider, for example, that Luther refers to the “beautiful (schöne) trumpet” of the resurrection. For Luther, musical beauty is defined by Christ’s luminous victory over evil. LW 28:99.
Finally, we are now in position to paint a more detailed portrait of Luther’s specific criteria for musical beauty in the church. First, we should note the fact that Luther did indeed express opinions about musical quality and style. Music and text must “have a genuine style” (die rechte Art haben), Luther claims rather vaguely.\(^\text{287}\) Second, Luther expresses strong opinions about the way the text and music of the German Mass should be “translated.”\(^\text{288}\) And third, as we have already seen, Luther enthusiastically endorsed the musical art of Josquin, whose compositions, he claims “flow freely, gently, and cheerfully, are not forced or cramped by rules, and are like the song of the finch.”\(^\text{289}\)

While the ambiguities of this passage (especially the “song of the finch”) have understandably generated much commentary, we do not need to explore the various interpretive options in detail here. For now, we should only register that Luther was no relativist when it came to evaluating works of musical art in the church, and that such discrimination would provide a warrant for future Lutheran composers to be likewise discriminating.

There are, however, certain guiding aesthetic principles in Luther’s musical theology that are clearer than the vague references cited above. First, the clearest aesthetic criterion for church music in Luther’s Josquin example is the idea of musical

\(^{287}\) LW 53:61.
\(^{288}\) “I would gladly have a Germany mass today. I am also occupied with it. But I would very much like it to have a true German character. For to translate the Latin text and retain the Latin tone or notes has my sanction, though it doesn’t sound polished or well done. Both the text and the notes, accent, melody, and manner or rendering ought to grow out of the true mother tongue and its inflection, otherwise all of it becomes an imitation in the manner of the apes.” LW 53:61.
\(^{289}\) “What is Law does not make progress, but what is Gospel does (i.e., the Law is static but the Gospel is dynamic, or, the Law is negative and the Gospel positive). God has preached the Gospel through music, too, as may be seen in the songs of Josquin, all of whose compositions flow freely, gently, and cheerfully, are not forced or cramped by rules, and are like the song of the finch.” WA no. 1258.
Luther praises Josquin because his music “flows freely,” and is not “forced or cramped by rules.” Luther was not opposed to musical rules in principle, as we saw above in the “B-fa, B-mi” example, but he did not want rules to restrain a composer’s freedom to develop their music into a more beautiful work of art. Indeed, Luther even demonstrates an interplay between freedom and rules in his own compositional life, given that he claimed to have “cleansed, corrected, and improved” a work he found and then “added a fourth voice.” This formulation suggests that Luther had certain rules in mind (possibly the avoidance of certain dissonances), such that the existing piece needed correction. Yet Luther also felt free to make those corrections and add a fourth voice, thus producing a polished and expanded version of the original. In this sense, Luther authorizes a composer to have the freedom to correct problems in their music and invent new harmonizations beyond a work’s status quo. Indeed, in the context of Luther’s musical aesthetics, these compositional acts could be considered augmentations of a musical work’s beauty.

A second of Luther’s aesthetic criteria for church music, which Anttila highlights, is the phenomenon of “musical light.” As briefly mentioned above, Anttila pits an “aesthetics of light” against an “aesthetics of proportion” in Luther, arguing for the former:

It may be surprising that the “aesthetics of light” better encompasses Luther’s theology of music. As was mentioned previously, the difference between the aesthetic of proportion and the aesthetics of light is that light affords us with immediate delight, whereas a sense of proportion requires a certain judgment based on (unconscious and instantaneous) calculation. In the aesthetics of light, aesthetic perception is a matter of joy and pleasure, rather than that of understanding and moral judgment. From the

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290 For an analysis of Luther’s aesthetic criterion of “libertas,” see: Anttila, 178-184.
above examination of the concepts of joy, pleasure, and beauty that were proposed by Luther, one can draw the conclusion that Luther’s idea of aesthetics is precisely that. Although “proportion” is a more musical concept on the surface and “light” pertains predominantly to the visual arts, Luther’s aesthetics of music is, in fact, an aesthetics of light. In a manner that resembles the radiance of light, music overwhelms the listener immediately, generating and expressing joy and pleasure.291

But not just any music can “overwhelm the listener” and generate joy and pleasure; it is particularly consonant, well-proportioned music that achieves that effect. Purely atonal music, for example, is often intellectually interesting and worthwhile; few would argue, though, that it generates “joy and pleasure” in the ears of listeners (nor is it often intended to so). As I argued above, Anttila is building an argument based on a false binary here, because all music involves the frequency proportions of pitched sound. The really interesting question is how proportion and disproportion relate to the more visual phenomena of light and darkness. And what Anttila does not say – and could not say given the binary he introduces – is that an alternation of consonances and dissonances in a work of musical art can generate the effect of “light shining in the darkness.” This aesthetic effect can certainly “overwhelm the listener” with its beauty, much like the subject of the prologue to John’s gospel.

In the prologue to John’s gospel, we read: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”292 This is a

291 Anttila, 195.
292 John 1:1-4, NRSV.
theological statement of the most metaphysical variety. John does not qualify that light only shines in certain dark places, or that there are certain conditions under which light will shine, or any other sort of qualifier. If there really is “darkness” in “musical nature” or “the harmonic series,” then the light of Christ shines there. As we saw in the last chapter, Luther expresses his understanding of this theological phenomenon in broad aesthetic terms; what he does not quite do, however, is explain how a composer might achieve this aesthetic effect in a work of musical art. All of the “building blocks” are there, so to speak, but it would take the work of future generations of Lutheran theologians and musicians to produce the most beautiful Christian music ever written.

In this section, I have shown three things about Luther’s reflections on musical aesthetics: a) that Luther uses aesthetic language to refer to Christ in his own musical work, b) that Luther believed that Christ’s victory over “death and the devil” did fundamentally change the nature of music itself, and finally, c) that Luther does provide certain broad aesthetic principles for Christian musical composition. Now, let us turn to consider how Luther’s conception of musical aesthetics was received in the eras between his life and Bach’s.

3.3.1) Musical Aesthetics in the Lutheran Tradition between Luther and Bach

While Bach owned multiple copies of Luther’s complete works and almost certainly read large swaths of it directly, two hundred years separate their lives and work. Therefore, an analysis of Bach’s interpretation of Lutheran aesthetics should also include intermediary figures who were influenced by Luther and likely influenced Bach in turn.
In the last chapter, I showed that elements of Luther’s aesthetics were carried forward by figures Bach was familiar with, such as Johann Arndt. In this section, I will extend that analysis into the realm of music, arguing that while the broad theological outlines of Luther’s aesthetics were retained in this intervening period, various figures such as Arndt, Andreas Werckmeister and others, helped specify the role of music in that aesthetic scheme.

3.3.2) Lutheran Musical Aesthetics in Arndt, Mattheson, Raupach, and Nicolai

As we saw in the last chapter, Johann Arndt carried several key elements of Luther’s aesthetics forward into a book Bach owned personally: *Wahres Christentum*. In this section, I will show that Arndt’s musical reflections are consonant with Luther’s own musical theology. Arndt thus serves not only as a linking figure between Luther’s theological aesthetics and the work of Bach; that link also includes the role of music in Luther’s theological framework.

In *Wahres Christentum*, Arndt carries forward Luther’s idea that God implanted music into the natural world for the benefit of humankind and its divine praise: “It is as if God had taken care to fill even the forests with their music, that so every place might resound with his praises, and that man might learn, even from the animals, that not only himself, but all creatures were made to praise and glorify God.”

Furthermore, Arndt

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seems to exhibit an awareness of the Pythagorean tradition that Luther embraced in his
document of creation, arguing that music came from “the sound of metals”: “Thus our
music came from the sound of metals; our skill in medicine, from other creatures; and our
astronomy, from the stars; which still farther illustrates my first observation, that the
whole world was created for the sake of man, for which he owes never-ending thanks to
his munificent Creator.”

Arndt also carries forward elements of Luther’s musical theology as it relates to
Israel’s worship in the Old Testament. In particular, he endorses the liturgical use of
instrumental music (which later Pietists would not), even arguing that the external forms
of music must be performed with the proper internal devotion:

In the Old Testament there were several kinds of divine music; some of
trumpets, some of psalteries and harps, some of cymbals, and other kinds
of musical instruments. From this some imagine that the Songs of
Degrees, as some of the Psalms are called, took their names. For they did
not sing all the Psalms to the same instrument, but adapted their
instruments to their subject, whether it were cheerful or sorrowful. All
these various kinds of music with which, under the Old Testament, they
sang praises unto God, being a part of the external ceremonial service,
have now ceased; and our spirit, soul, mind, and mouth are become the
trumpet, psaltery, harp, and cymbal of God. To which St. Paul alludes,
when he says, “Singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Col. 3:16.
By which expression we are by no means forbidden, either in public or
private, to praise God with voices or instruments of music; but it requires
that all this be done with true devotion, in the spirit, and from the heart,
lest religion should be thought to consist in empty sounds and the external
pomp of divine service.

In another place, Arndt reiterates his position on this internal/external musical dynamic,
now even doing something Luther did repeatedly: call the Psalms “beautiful.” “Amongst

294 Ibid., 4, 2, 7, 3.
295 Ibid., 2, 41, 10.
other things that may be learned from this beautiful passage of the Psalmist,” he writes, “this is one, that the singing of holy hymns and praises to God, proceeding from a truly devout soul, are attended with great advantages and spiritual blessings.”

Bach owned a copy of Wahres Christentum, and for him this text would have represented one of the earliest appropriations of Lutheran aesthetics and the role of music therein. However, much time had passed even between the time of Arndt and Bach. Therefore, in order to tighten the aesthetic links between Luther and Bach even more tightly, I will show that the tradition of Lutheran musical aesthetics was still alive and well at the time of Bach. In particular, I will be focusing on texts of two figures we know Bach was aware of (and even collaborated with to a limited extent): Johann Mattheson (1681-1764), who wrote “Betrachtung der Himmlischen Musik,” and Christoph Raupach (1686-1744), who wrote “Deutliche Beweis-Gründe.”

We cannot know whether or not Bach read these specific texts, but according to Robin Leaver, “the subject matter of the two documents translated here appears to have been known to Bach. This is hardly surprising since neither contains highly original material but are in essence two different summations of common knowledge that had been expressed in different ways in a variety of publications over a long period of time.” Moreover, while Bach and Mattheson certainly did not agree on all musical matters, they would have both read a large body of common Lutheran theological works. Such disagreements clearly fall under the umbrella of what we can reasonably call “eighteenth-century Lutheran musical aesthetics.”

296 Ibid., 2, 41, 3.
297 Johann Mattheson, Betrachtung der Himmlischen Musik, (Hamburg: 1747) and Christoph Raupach, Deutliche Beweis-Gründe, (Hamburg: 1717).
298 Irwin, Foretastes of Heaven, series editor forward by Robin Leaver, xv.
Raupach’s text is clearly a defense of Luther’s musical theology against his “perceived decline of musical standards in the early eighteenth century” (which is part of why Mattheson wrote a preface to it), and we find him using forms of the word “Schönheit” to refer to music throughout. Moreover, these references often come directly from Luther, and in places his formulation of the relationship between art and beauty bears resemblance to the one expressed by Birnbaum in his debate with Scheibe.

In defending his position, Raupach quotes directly from Luther’s Tischreden, where Luther writes: “music is a beautiful [“schöne”] and glorious gift of God and next to theology.” Again he cites Luther, arguing that music is “one of the most beautiful [“eine der schönsten”] and glorious gifts of God, which is very much an enemy of Satan; through it many temptations and evil thoughts are driven away, and the devil does not endure it.” He then expounds on the latter part of that claim, claiming that Satan hates music’s “beautiful [“schönen”], orderly harmonies and melodies.” These references are only a partial sampling of Raupach’s consistent citation of Luther as an authority on musical beauty in the church.

Yet Raupach does not solely rely on his references to musical beauty in Luther’s works; he develops Luther’s thoughts on musical aesthetics even further himself. In his discussion of “figural music,” a form that arose only after Luther, Raupach argues that it should be embraced “so that the praise of God may be pleasant and lovely [“lieblich und schön”].” Raupach also connects the beauty of Israel’s liturgical music to the beauty of

299 Ibid., Introduction, xxi.
300 Ibid., page 18, paragraph 1.
301 Ibid., 29, 6.
302 Ibid.
303 Ibid., 13, 4.
church music in a more direct way than Luther did: “We also know that they were eager, in accordance with their means, to make the praise of God as beautiful and appealing [“schön und lieblich”] as they were able.”304 This issues in an injunction to the contemporary church to do likewise: “Accordingly, we are also obliged to follow the reported examples of this kind to institute further our singing and instrumental playing in every good, beautiful [“schön”], appealing, and edifying manner, each according to his means, which does happen in many Lutheran Christian congregations.”305 Beautiful church music, according to Raupach, can also make work easier: “people’s various inclinations bear witness that many who are adorned with the loveliest [“schönsten”] gifts of musical ability… are able to lighten their daily work most happily and pleasantly and encourage themselves thereto in the most uplifting way through such musical gifts combined with God’s Word.”306 He even goes so far as to suggest that beautiful music’s “refreshment of the heart” can heal the body, a claim that Luther never explicitly makes but would very likely endorse: “Laurence Schröder, in his treatise Vom Lobe Gottes (Copenhagen, 1639), p. 180, writes of a distinguished citizen of Gustrow who for a while was laid up with a fever; the patient himself later reported to the author that when he heard lovely [“schönen”] instrumental music outside the door at the hour that he had a paroxysm, his heart was so refreshed that the fever left him from that point on and by God’s grace has not returned.”307 Finally, Raupach argues for a directly proportional relationship between artistry and musical beauty, much like Birnbaum: “When one sings and plays most beautifully [“schönste”] according to the best musical art, we are all the

304 Ibid., 17, 2.
305 Ibid.
306 Ibid., 25, 7.
307 Ibid., 38, 3.
more able to envision in this a foretaste of heavenly music.”  

He then quotes the exact passage from Luther (from his *Encomium Musices*) I have been arguing influenced Bach and Birnbaum.

We find more of the same in Mattheson’s text, and in the interest of not belaboring the point, I will be focusing on aesthetic elements not discussed by Raupach. In his preface to Raupach’s work, Mattheson ramps up the rhetorical intensity by mocking people who scorn the beauty of music: “the more beautiful the music [“je schöner die Musik”], the greater is their abstention.” In his text, Mattheson offers his own interpretation of the passage from Luther’s *Encomium Musices*, using an analogy from painting to illustrate the importance of musical artifice to musical beauty: “what is naturally beautiful [“natürliche Schönheit”] is too outmoded for us; it must be artificial, then it has style! Painters will know whether it takes more skill to make a perfectly lovely [“vollkommen schönes”] and smooth face or a very ugly and wrinkled face.” Mattheson perhaps comes closest to Luther’s overarching theological aesthetics, however, when he discusses the form of musical beauty at the heart of his own text: *himmlischen Musik*.  

Consider Mattheson’s descriptions of heavenly music, where he argues that heavenly music will be more perfect and beautiful than earthly music. First, he claims that “music in paradise had its origin immediately at the creation of the world,” echoing

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308 Ibid., 41, 1.
309 For Mattheson’s basic claims that music is beautiful, see, for example, page 85, paragraph 33, “we have a blessed multitude of the most beautiful (der Schönsten), heartwarming hymns,” page 88, paragraph 38, “the beautiful (schöne) Christmas hymn,” and page 94, paragraph 48, “do you like beautiful (schöne) music?”
310 Ibid., 6, 9.
311 Ibid., 85, 32.
Luther’s own claim that Adam and Eve lived in a state of original beauty. 

“For who would question,” Mattheson cites from Johann Conrad Dannhauer, “whether humans in a state of innocence sang and made music to the honor of their God? And who would deny that human beings, if they had remained in this state, would also have praised God the Creator with instruments? And indeed this would have been much lovelier and more beautiful [“viel lieblicher und schöner”] than any music that may be employed after the Fall.”

He also writes that heavenly music will be more “lovely and artistic,” now quoting the Lutheran theologian Hector Mithobius: “Do we marvel here on earth when, say, a beautiful maiden [“eine schöne Jungfrau”] with a delicate, clear voice sings in such a lovely and artistic manner that we forget everything else and want to listen ever after only to her? In the next life we will all be pure maidens whose beauty [“Schönheit”] will be completely perfect and whose voices will far, far exceed all worldly music when we sing the songs of Moses and of the Lamb.”

Yet Mattheson’s use of the Lutheran musico-aesthetic tradition reaches a heavenly fever pitch when he cites the work of another Lutheran figure, whose work made a direct and powerful impact on the cantatas of Bach.

Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608) wrote the texts for two of Bach’s most well known cantatas (BWV 1 and BWV 140) and Mattheson’s reference to his work is worth quoting in full, since it unifies several of the main strands of argumentation in this entire dissertation:

312 Ibid., 99, 57.
313 Ibid.
314 Ibid., 100, 59.
The last-named, the former head pastor at St. Catharine’s in Hamburg conveys in his *Theoria vitae aeternae*, Book V, the following remarkable account: ‘This world, when it has been burned up and cleansed through fire will also, like our bodies, be renewed and changed into an incomparably more beautiful form [schönere Gestalt]. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. The moon will shine like the sun, and the sun will be seven times brighter than now. The tempestuous sea and the wild ocean do not belong to the future world—only fine, quiet air, beautiful country with pleasant trees, brooks, streams, etc. Even the birds will also praise God in that place with lovely chatter.’ (Why not humans with perfect knowledge of musical art? For everything will be new.) ‘When our blessed journey home out of heaven into the new earth occurs, its inhabitants will be human beings, just as human beings now live in today’s old world; they will perform everything with righteousness and holiness and will rule and guide with true hearts. They will not be different human beings than those who previously lived on our old earth, who have been reborn here to eternal life. With Christ they will come down out of the higher heaven into the new earth, and in the high air the angels will be heard playing stringed instruments and the whole heavenly choir singing. It will be like a wedding celebration where harps, cymbals, organs, tympani, pipes, trumpets and strings are played for dancing. The angels will then join with us in their hymn of joy. The singers go in front after them the minstrels among the maidens playing drums. Then will be said with greatest perfection: ‘with trumpets, psalteries, harps, tympani, dancing, strings, pipes, loud sounding cymbals, let everything that has breath praise the Lord.’”

Here we find a very poetic and musical description of Revelation 21, the new heaven and new earth where there will be no more tears, pain, or death. That which was “misshapen,” or “ungestalt,” will then receive a “more beautiful form,” a “schönere Gestalt.” Human beings will have perfect knowledge of musical art, all manner of instruments will be involved, and even the natural world (including birds) will sing its praises to God. Even the dark moon will shine with beautiful light, and everything that shone before will shine even more brightly. Luther could hardly have asked for a richer – or more accurate – portrayal of his understanding of music’s heavenly beauty, achieved by the death and

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315 Ibid., 90, 43.
resurrection of Christ.

3.3.3) Lippius, Werckmeister and the Role of Tonality in Lutheran Aesthetics

Having shown that many of the main features of Luther’s understanding of musical beauty were carried forward by various figures into the time of Bach, let us now turn to an important development within: the growth of theological reflection on tonality (and especially the distinction between consonance and dissonance) in what Eric Chafe calls the “Lutheran ‘metaphysical’ tradition in music and music theory.”\textsuperscript{316} We have already seen that tonality plays a role in Bach’s aesthetics (both theoretically and practically) and in Luther’s aesthetics. Now, we will see that in the intervening period, Johannes Lippius (1585-1612) and Andreas Werckmeister (1645-1706), worked to clarify the nature of tonality within the overarching Lutheran theological framework they inherited.

In his \textit{Synopsis Musicae Novae} (1610), Lippius posited a connection that Luther never made explicit but almost certainly took for granted: the harmonic triad as a reflection of the divine Trinity in creation.\textsuperscript{317} The commonalities are rather straightforward: in each, we find three distinct realities (pitches in the former and persons in the latter) and in each, we find a unifying reality (the simultaneous and harmonious sounding of the pitches in the former and the divine substance in the latter). Moreover, because of triadic inversion (C-E-G, for example, could be re-written as G-E-C while

\textsuperscript{316} Chafe, \textit{Analyzing Bach Cantatas}, Chapter 2.
remaining a harmonic triad), any concerns about hierarchy (such as one would find in various Trinitarian heresies in the early church) do not apply. Indeed, the harmonic triad has been a rich resource for Christian theology, and Benito V. Rivera makes its historico-musical importance clear: “The concept of triadic generation and invertibility,” he writes, “so clearly and firmly established by Johannes Lippius in 1610, and then again in 1612, constitutes a milestone in the history of harmonic theory.”\footnote{Rivera, 66.} Lippius reached that milestone in the early seventeenth-century, but later generations of Lutheran theologians and musicians would take up his work and build on it. In fact, when it comes to the theological meaning of tonality, Rivera claims that our next figure took Lippius’ movement to its apogee: “One may very well say that the movement reached its highest point in Andreas Werckmeister’s Harmonologia of 1702.”\footnote{Rivera, 66.}

Although he is now “known today primarily for his systems of musical temperament,” Werckmeister “blended Baroque cosmology with Lutheran theology in writings where he advocated high standards and integrity in matters of church music.”\footnote{Irwin, \textit{Foretastes of Heaven}, xxii.} While we cannot know with precision how familiar Bach was with his work, we know that Werckmeister’s experiments in temperament influenced Bach and the naming of his \textit{Wohltemperierte Clavier},\footnote{Wolff, \textit{Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician}, 228.} and that Bach was connected to Werckmeister through developments in organology.\footnote{Ibid., 334.}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Rivera, 66.
\item Irwin, \textit{Foretastes of Heaven}, xxii.
\item Wolff, \textit{Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician}, 228.
\item Ibid., 334.
\end{thebibliography}
Werckmeister’s beliefs about musical allegory is “probably beyond dispute.” Because the focus of this dissertation is on the idea of beauty rather than musical temperament, I will only be discussing temperament as it relates to the role of dissonance in Lutheran musical theology.

Werckmeister was a Lutheran pastor himself, and throughout his highly speculative and theoretical works on music, he exhibits an awareness of music’s place within the Lutheran theological program. “Like many others in the Lutheran ‘metaphysical’ tradition,” Chafe writes, “Werckmeister clung to the scriptural pronunciation that the universe was created by God ‘according to number, weight and measure,’ holding that the numerical proportions that underlay the primary musical consonances, the so-called ‘harmonic’ numbers, reflected God’s work and nature.” In other words, just as Luther would advise, Werckmeister situated the tradition of Pythagorean musical numerology within a Christian doctrine of creation. But beyond Luther, Werckmeister decided to delve deeply into the realm of musical numerology. At the most basic level, this meant aligning the unison with divine aseity and the major triad with the Trinity; at more advanced levels, it meant interpreting various forms of biblical numerology in musical terms (proportions of Noah’s ark, for example).

Particularly relevant to this study is Werckmeister’s very Lutheran awareness of how the fall affected the nature of music. In the first place, Werckmeister understood that temperament itself was directly related to the fall: “Since the harmonic numbers and the musical consonances to which they corresponded represented the sphere of God, which was one of perfection,” Chafe writes, “the impossibility of a pure and perfect

323 Chafe, 38.
324 Ibid., 24.
temperament became an allegory of the unavoidable imperfection of human life.”\textsuperscript{325} The so-called “Pythagorean comma,”\textsuperscript{326} for example, would not be seen as a sign that God did not exist or that there was no order in the musical world; it just signified that musical nature had fallen from its original perfection and any attempt to systematize it would be imperfect as well. In Werckmeister’s seventeenth-century, musicians recognized “in countless ways that the old ideal of perfection has become historical, a lost paradise as it were. An inevitable result of the new focus on affect or \textit{Gemütsbewegung} was a tacit acknowledgement that imperfection was embedded in the very nature of music.”\textsuperscript{327}

Even more specifically, Werckmeister recognized that dissonance was one of those very embedded imperfections, as Chafe makes clear: “When, therefore, Werckmeister juxtaposes ideals of perfection and imperfection in the triads and in temperament, he is acknowledging the compromise on which music is founded—that music necessarily introduces imperfect intervals and dissonances because it has fallen, like humankind, from its original purity.”\textsuperscript{328} Dissonance is an example of “\textit{unvollkommenheit}” in nature, the “incompleteness” of mortal life that contrasts with the completeness and perfection in God’s own being.\textsuperscript{329}

It may have seemed, during the “Luther’s theology of fallen nature” section of this chapter,\textsuperscript{330} that Luther did not develop a strong theory of dissonance and that I had attempted to put words in his mouth to strengthen my case about his influence on Bach’s

\textsuperscript{325} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{326} See 1.1.3, footnote 35.
\textsuperscript{327} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{328} Ibid. Chafe also discusses the role of dissonance in Werckmeister’s theory as it relates to “\textit{Durch Adams Fall},” 89-100.
\textsuperscript{329} Ibid., 212-213.
\textsuperscript{330} See 3.2.4.
aesthetics. However, the example of Werckmeister suggests that there is a clear logic to situating dissonance within Luther’s doctrine of the fall. While Luther only hinted at it in piecemeal form, Werckmeister developed it into a coherent musico-theological form that likely helped to clarify Bach’s own understanding.

3.4.1) Bach as an Interpreter of Lutheran Aesthetics

The aim of this chapter has been to situate music within the framework of Lutheran aesthetics, which was the subject of the last chapter. In particular, I have attempted to show that Luther elevated music to such an unprecedented aesthetic level because he could ground it in his Christology. Moreover, I have also attempted to show that later Lutherans detailed the musicological nature of Luther’s theological aesthetics. What we might call “the Lutheran tradition of musical aesthetics” forms the background for Bach’s own aesthetic thought and work, and it is to Bach’s interpretation of that tradition that we now turn.
Chapter 4: Bach as an Interpreter of Lutheran Aesthetics

“In Bach’s music, though, motion is absolute, and all thematic content is submitted to the irreducible disseminations that fill it out: each note is an unforced, unnecessary, and yet wholly fitting supplement, even when the fittingness is deferred across massive dissonances by way of the most intricate contrapuntal mediations. Nor are dissonances ever final, or ever tragic: they are birth pangs, awaiting the glory to be disclosed in their reconciliations – their stretti and recapitulations. Bach’s is the ultimate Christian music; it reflects as no other human artifact ever has or could the Christian vision of creation.”

- David Bentley Hart

“The ‘ecstasis’ that Bach’s polyphony evokes is the more miraculous because his apprehension of human anguish – manifest in his use of dissonance – is so intense.”

- Wilfrid Mellers

“And under the umbrella of seventeenth-century Lutheran theology, Bach’s musical discoveries—like Newton’s scientific advances, which Bach almost certainly did not know—took him to areas of the creative mind undreamed of before and ultimately pointed to the operations of God.”

- Christoph Wolff

4.1.1) Introduction

Bach lovers are like lovers of any other artist: they are hungry to understand the convictions of the person who created that beautiful art. They want to know about the conditions of belief that made such art possible, and are willing to dig into dusty

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documents to figure it all out. Even the smallest scrap of artistic confession can excite the mind of someone obsessed with learning more about the beliefs of his or her beloved artist.

Unlike many other artists, however, Bach apparently considered the idea of leaving a personal artistic manifesto a low priority. Maybe he had no idea that so many people would venerate his work hundreds of years later; maybe he was self-conscious about his ability to express himself without music; or maybe, and perhaps most likely, he considered it a distraction from the core tasks of his vocation: musical study, composition, and performance. After all, Bach left this world just as he entered it: in the midst of music-making. So despite his rather flat-footed attack, every Bach lover owes a debt of gratitude to Johann Adolph Scheibe. After all, he provoked Bach to do something he otherwise might not have done: leave us some semblance of an artistic manifesto. At least Bach lovers can try to feed off those scraps.

This dissertation, then, is one such attempt. Chapter one presents my attempt to put together the “scraps” of Bach’s aesthetic self-presentation, primarily using the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate and the texts associated with beauty (Schönheit) in Bach’s vocal oeuvre as source material. Chapters two and three, then, present my condensed rendering of the body of texts that I believe profoundly influenced that aesthetic self-presentation: the theological aesthetics of Martin Luther and his followers. This fourth chapter, then, presents my reading of Bach’s aesthetics (chapter one) in light of Lutheran theological aesthetics (chapters two and three). By the end of the chapter, then, I hope to have shed explanatory light on Bach’s aesthetics by presenting him as a sophisticated interpreter of Lutheran theological aesthetics. At that point, I will shift to chapter five,
where I plan to present some implications of this study for both the modern academy and church.

In order to round out the argumentative loop I have opened, I plan to take the following steps: First, I will show that Bach was exposed to Lutheran theological aesthetics enough to sustain a general claim about its influence. If Bach had never encountered these ideas directly, it would become much more difficult to argue that they influenced him at all. Second, in order to make this line of influence more specific, I will situate Bachian aesthetics within the broader theological outline of the past two chapters. Here at the heart of this dissertation, I will attempt to explain the scarce fragments of Bachian aesthetics using the resources of Lutheran theological aesthetics, which are quite the opposite of fragmentary. If anything, Luther overwhelms us with his vast and comprehensive writings. I am not claiming to have solved all of the problems associated with Luther’s aesthetics (or alleged lack thereof), nor that Bach himself had done so (though he may have). I am claiming, however, that a thorough reading of Lutheran aesthetics sheds explanatory light on various problems in Bach studies. Third, I plan on situating these findings historically, both in terms of Bach’s time and place and our own. One of the implied claims of this dissertation is that, in trying to explain Bach’s work, Bach scholars have not yet adequately accounted for the impact of Luther’s theological aesthetics on Bach’s self-understanding. Therefore, on the one hand, I am deepening or expanding the approach taken by figures who represent a rather “orthodox”

334 Luther did not write a single volume on theological aesthetics, and this lack of a specific “Theology of Beauty” has undoubtedly contributed to the perception of him as an anti-aesthetic figure. He did, however, write an astonishing amount on theological subject matter (whether in the form of treatises, biblical commentaries, sermons, or other forms), and reflections on beauty permeate that theological work to an extent that has been generally underappreciated.
interpretation of Bach-Luther studies, such as Robin Leaver and Christoph Wolff. On the other hand, I am offering an approach that stands at a critical distance from several other approaches in modern Bach scholarship: specifically, those of Richard Taruskin, John Butt, Rebecca Lloyd, and Laurence Dreyfus. This chapter will terminate with some critical comments on their approach to Bach-Luther studies. At that point we will have closed the argument about Luther’s influence on Bach and I will present (in chapter five) a series of implications of my study for the modern academy and church.

4.2.1) Bach’s Exposure to Lutheran Theology

As the subtitle of Mark C. Mattes’ 2017 book *Martin Luther’s Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal* suggests, Martin Luther is hardly a prominent figure in the history of theological aesthetics. And when he does appear, as in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Die Herrlichkeit*, he tends to represent everything anti-aesthetic in theology: a rejection of metaphysics, analogy, and contemplation, and an embrace of God’s “flash-lightning event of salvation” in Christ.335 We have grown accustomed to this image of Luther, the iconoclastic founder of modern interior faith who strips away medieval excesses to reveal the core essence of Christianity: Christ on the cross dying an ugly death for the sake of a sinful, fallen world. So by calling his book a “reappraisal,” Mattes has announced that he will be offering his reader an aesthetic Luther, a Luther that seems to have been ignored by theologians for centuries.

335 Anttila, *Luther’s Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure*, 164. Also see: 2.1.1, footnote 5.
Such theological ignorance of Luther’s aesthetics surely stems, at least in part, from the assumption that theology can only be done through words. The theological sophistication of Bach’s music, however, provokes us to consider whether such an assumption is mistaken. Could theology not be done through another medium with its own kind of “logic,” such as the one that Luther embraced with almost unreserved enthusiasm: music? After all, it is largely through music that Luther’s theological aesthetics has survived, and particularly in the works of one of Luther’s greatest admirers: Bach himself. In this section of the chapter, I will show that Bach was thoroughly immersed in Lutheran theological doctrine in general (both by family upbringing and by personal choice), and that he was particularly exposed to Luther’s extreme focus on Christology (which forms the basis of Luther’s aesthetic understanding). If there is no evidence that Bach actually read Luther or that he was taught Lutheran theology by others, then it could be argued that the aesthetic commonalities between the two figures are simply superficial or accidental. Indeed, this is the sort of criticism Michael Marissen makes of John Butt’s use of Leibniz and Spinoza to explain Bach: he is trying to haul water from elsewhere when a stream flows right near Bach’s garden. I am trying to explain Bach using the stream closest to his garden (Lutheran theology), and I will therefore marshal evidence of his exposure to it.

336 Marissen, Bach and God, 14. Here Marissen is still too reticent to acknowledge the explanatory power of theology in Bach’s work. As a disclaimer, he writes: “theological approaches admittedly run the risk of leaving some readers with the feeling that virtually anything could be “demonstrated.” For interdisciplinary work, one might prefer philosophy to theology.” Such disclaimers, however, should be unnecessary when analyzing the music of Bach. A more pressing question would be: “why would anyone feel compelled to defend the use of theology in explaining the work of Bach?” The epistemological assumptions of the modern secular academy (which Bach knew very little, if anything, of) are powerfully at play here. Marissen’s hypothetical interlocutors
Born into a Lutheran family with an extraordinary musical background, Bach’s theological and musical education began long before he ever stepped foot into a formal educational institution. The son of Eisenach’s town piper who used his home for teaching and training, the young Bach would have “absorbed from the very beginning an atmosphere dominated by music and musicians, involving the entire family and almost all who lived with them.”

At St. George’s Church, he would have encountered scripture reading, preaching and the teaching of traditional Lutheran doctrine. But perhaps most importantly, at church his eyes and ears would have been opened to the possibility of a Lutheran synthesis of theology and music. In his early worship services, for example, he would have heard polyphonic selections from the Eisenach Cantional, which included the sacred works of Josquin Desprez and others. By the time his formal schooling began at the age of eight, Bach’s creative pump had been primed by a variety of Lutheran musical, theological and musico-theological experiences.

Bach only spent two years at the Eisenach Latin School, but during that time he received a solid education in Lutheran theology, grammar, logic, and, of course, music. He would have studied hymns and scripture regularly (especially the psalms), while also learning how to understand scripture doctrinally through engagement with texts like Luther’s Catechisms. Yet because of new educational reforms by Jan Amos Comenius and Andreas Reyher, these traditional elements of a Lutheran theological education deserve a swift rebuke for their mistaken epistemological assumptions, not an empathetic disclaimer.

Wolff, 22.
338 Ibid., 25.
339 Ibid., 26-27.
would have been wedded to a broader, more practically oriented, educational program.

As Christoph Wolff puts it:

Without straying from the theological focus, Comenius and Reyher systematized the areas of knowledge and stressed, in addition to the study of languages, grammar, and logic, the importance of contact with objects in the environment, with “real things.” As they did not consider religion and science to be incompatible, belief in God as creator and the perfection of God’s creation remained as central as ever. Their books and pedagogy would exert a strong influence on Sebastian’s schooling in Eisenach, Ohrdruf, and Lüneburg, from the elementary level through the prima.³⁴⁰

Two elements stand out here as especially relevant to a young boy interested in music: first, the educational embrace of ‘contact with objects in the environment’ gives him license to learn from, say, the nature of sounds emitted from a plucked string or a singing bird, or the characteristics of folk melodies he might hear or sing outside of school. Second, young Bach could couch these explorations into ‘objects in the environment’ in theological terms, perhaps even provoking him to imagine his own theological vocation as a musical scientist who works toward the perfection of nature.

After both of his parents died within the span of a year, Bach moved to live with his elder brother Johann Christoph in Ohrdruf, where his formal schooling continued at the Lyceum Illustre. In Ohrdruf, Bach was first exposed to Leonhard Hütter’s (1563-1616) Compendium locorum theologicorum, a “systematic summary of Christian doctrine derived from the Bible and early Lutheran theological writings.”³⁴¹ While the text focuses especially on practical topics such as “good works, penance, the ministry and the

³⁴⁰ Ibid.
³⁴¹ Ibid., 40.
church,”342 it also addresses theological topics that would bear on Bach’s understanding of the nature of music, such as Christ, creation, and the presence of Christ in creation. In Article IV, paragraph 3, for example, Hütter asks: “Woher beweisest du daß die Schöpfung sey ein Werck der gantzen Dreyfälligkeit?”343 In response, he cites three passages from scripture, which are linked by a pivotal theological concept: das Wort, the Word of God. In Genesis 1:1-2, Hütter appeals to “das wesentliche Wort, das ist der Sohn Gottes.”344 He also references Psalm 33:6, which reads: “Der Himmel ist durchs Wort des Herrn gemacht, und all sein Heer durch den Geist seines Mundes.”345 This passage, well known for its “logos” translation in the Septuagint, links well with Hütter’s final, most explicit, reference to Jesus Christ as God’s Word: John 1:1. Whether or not young Bach would have understood all of the historical nuances of this logos tradition is beside the point. What matters is that Hütter’s Compendium would have taught him to see Christ as the creative Word of God, who unites the divinely created, inbuilt structures of the world – nature – with the words of scripture.

Bach finished his formal schooling at the Ritter-Academie of St. Michael’s School in Lüneburg, an institution well known for its rigorous academic standards and focus on theological learning.346 There he continued his education in Lutheran theology, with Hütter’s Compendium again playing a key role. As a choral scholar, too, he would have

344 “The substantial Word, that is the Son of God.”
345 “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth.”
346 Wolff, 58.
regularly practiced and performed a whole range of sacred works in the Lutheran choral
tradition, such as the twenty-six-part concerto “Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele” by Johann
Schelle (1648-1701), who occupied the post that Bach would later assume: Leipzig
Thomaskantor. When Bach assumed that post in 1723, he received the requisite
certificate of theological competence, which was “certainly no formality”347 and was
given by a “notoriously tough examiner known to flunk cantorate candidates.”348 Anyone
skeptical of Bach’s awareness of Lutheran theology should read the report in full, which
is cited above.

Although Bach never attended university and showed inconsistent interest in
obeying the rules of formal educational institutions, there should be no doubt that by

347 The specific details are worth quoting in full, as they provide helpful detail on the
level of theological competence expected of someone in Bach’s position: “This
examination covered basic Biblical and theological knowledge, quite detailed and widely
compassed, and certainly no formality. Almost exactly a year before, Conrad Kuffner, the
cantor-elect of Zwickau, went through a similar examination process. There was nothing
wrong with his musical abilities, indeed, his audition, the direction of concerted music on
Cantate (Fourth Sunday after Easter, 3 May 1722), was accorded “great applause.” But
the Leipzig Consistory could not confirm Küffner as the new cantor in Zwickau because
Dr. Schmid - the same professor who examined Bach a year later - reported that the
candidate could not answer satisfactorily basic Biblical and elementary theological
questions. Küffner therefore could not be appointed cantor in Zwickau because, in
addition to teaching and directing music in church, the position included the teaching of
basic theology in the school, a task for which he was clearly ill-equipped. There was
plainly no such problem with Bach, but he did have to undergo a second examination a
few days after the first. This time he was examined by Salomon Deyling, superintendent
(senior pastor) and professor of theology in Leipzig, who had also countersigned
Schmid’s certificate of examination a few days earlier. In a letter to the Consistory, dated
13 May 1723, Deyling states that Bach had subscribed to the Formula of Concord, and
therefore to the theological position of the Book of Concord as a whole. The actual
document that Bach signed on 13 May 1723 reveals that he subscribed to the Formula of
Concord twice: once positively, endorsing Lutheran doctrines, and once negatively,
denying non-Lutheran beliefs, which is how the Formula of Concord was written. Bach,
therefore, was not required to be simply a musician but a church musician with a specific
level of competence in Lutheran confessional theology.” Leaver, “Johann Sebastian
348 Wolff, 240.
adulthood he had learned to love Lutheran theology. In past generations of Bach scholarship, one could cast doubt on a claim such as this and argue, partially on the basis of his routine spats with church authorities, that Bach was a “begrudging, impious church musician.”⁴⁴⁹ In 1983, however, Robin Leaver published Bach’s Theological Library, a detailed account of the books Bach owned personally and documents related to his acquisition of them.⁴⁵⁰ Leaver argues that this library was no ordinary one for a musician and composer like Bach, and that “many a pastor in Bach’s day would have been proud to have owned such a collection of Biblical, theological and homiletical books.”⁴⁵¹ Among the contents, we find the complete works of Martin Luther, works of Lutheran theologians such as Johann Arndt and Erdmann Neumeister, Thomas a Kempis’ Imitation of Christ, and a variety of Bibles (including the extant Calov Bible with Bach’s many annotations).⁴⁵² We also now know that Bach spent quite a bit of his cherished earnings on these books,⁴⁵³ and that he considered himself capable of exercising judgment about other Lutheran theological figures.⁴⁵⁴ It was Leaver’s hope that these discoveries would open up new avenues for theological Bach research, evidenced by the closing thoughts of his introduction: “As these volumes in Bach’s library are examined by Bach scholars no doubt they will reveal information that will help solve some of the problems regarding

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³⁴⁹ This language, from Marissen and Melamed, is in reference to Friedrich Blume, who famously declared at the 1962 Mainz Bachfest that Bach had “no special liking for church work,” and that it was hardly a “spiritual necessity” for him. Daniel Melamed and Michael Marissen, eds. An Introduction to Bach Studies, 34. See: Friedrich Blume. “Outlines of a New Picture of Bach.” Music & Letters 44, no. 3 (1963): 218.
³⁵⁰ Leaver, Bach’s Theological Library.
³⁵¹ Ibid., 22.
³⁵² Ibid., 22-26.
³⁵³ Ibid., 12.
³⁵⁴ See Bach’s comparison of the “theological greatness” of Luther and Johann Friedrich Mayer in Leaver, Bach’s Theological Library, 42.
the man and his work… But the work of understanding the total contents of Bach’s library and establishing how it relates to his life and work has only really just begun.”\(^\text{355}\)

Unfortunately, Bach scholarship has been slow to take up the task. Introducing the state of theological Bach research in 1998, Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed wrote: “Most theological study of Bach has focused mainly on the librettos of the vocal works, not so much on the notes or how the words and the notes together generate religious meanings.”\(^\text{356}\) Another fifteen years later, musicologist Eric Chafe expressed his dismay at the general neglect of Bach’s theological library: “Despite considerable research into this subject over the past two or three decades, it is not at all well known to Bach scholars, and most definitely not to the general reader or Bach lover.”\(^\text{357}\) Here I am arguing that the theological resources closest to him can throw considerably more light on Bach’s work and aesthetic self-understanding than has so far been acknowledged. Luther watered the stream of Bach’s thought, and now we should dive more deeply into those waters.

\section*{4.3.1) Bach as an Interpreter of Lutheran Aesthetics}

In what follows, I intend to pick up the rather murky, scattered, and fragmentary outline of Bach’s aesthetics (chapter one) and hold it up to the light of the Lutheran aesthetics that preceded it (chapters two and three). Hopefully, then, this section will display Bach’s aesthetics in a form illuminated by the broader tradition of Lutheran

\begin{footnotes}
\item[355] Ibid., 26-27.
\item[356] Marissen and Melamed, eds., \textit{Introduction to Bach Studies}, 151.
\item[357] Chafe, \textit{J.S. Bach’s Johannine Theology}, 19.
\end{footnotes}
aesthetics he inherited. Many implications could be drawn from this study (such as those of chapter five), but this chapter will focus on the aesthetic relationship between Bach and Luther/Lutheranism, which was set up by the first three chapters.

4.3.2) Bach and the Beauty of Nature

Since Bach’s death, many people have praised his music in glowing theological terms. Many of them fixate on the idea that Bach’s music is somehow pre-lapsarian, that it expresses the original beauty of God’s creation before the devil (through Adam and Eve) caused it to fall. Hence Goethe claims that we hear Bach’s music “as if the eternal harmony were conversing with itself as it might have happened in God’s heart shortly before he created the world.” Goethe said this after witnessing one of Bach’s great vocal masterpieces, and many others (such as David Bentley Hart in the text quoted at the beginning of this chapter) claim to have sensed a pre-lapsarian beauty in Bach’s instrumental music itself.

If Bach had written much (or anything) about the nature of music in its pre-lapsarian Edenic state, then this section of this chapter would necessarily begin there. Unfortunately, he did not. On the other hand, however, Luther wrote extensively about this chapter of theo-dramatic history, and we should not be surprised if elements of Luther’s musical doctrine of creation shed light on what we know of Bach. In particular, we will highlight those moments when the idea of musical beauty appears in this broader theological context.

Throughout his writings, Luther claimed that music is one of the most beautiful gifts of God. By calling music a “beautiful gift,” Luther meant to set up a contrast. Music is not just “made” by humans; it has a divinely implanted “nature,” which is independent of human contrivance. Put more positively, for Luther music has so much natural integrity that it requires human attention and respect. Indeed, as we saw in the last chapter, that seems to be precisely one of the most beautiful aspects of music for Luther: it causes human beings to marvel that it has intrinsic properties at all, and to recognize the existence of a creator who implanted those properties into creation. In this scheme, the creator of nature can freely seduce the investigative attention of the would-be musical scientist, provoking him or her to explore latent beauty hidden within that created nature.

It would be odd, to say the least, if this tradition were not known and adhered to by Bach; the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate strongly suggests as much. Take, for example, Birnbaum’s invocation of the ancient Aristotelian principle that art should “imitate (nachahmen) nature,” which Wolff explains in the prologue to his Bach biography:

Birnbaum’s argument draws in part on Gradus ad Parnassum (Steps to Parnassus), a 1725 counterpoint treatise whose author, Johann Joseph Fux, refers to “art which imitates and perfects nature, but never destroys it.” Bach owned a copy of this important Latin treatise and may well have directed Birnbaum to emphasize the ancient Aristotelian principle “art imitates nature,” a dictum that lay at the heart of what Bach considered musical science. For Bach, art lay between the reality of the world—nature—and God, who ordered this reality. Indeed, Leipzig philosophers subscribed to that relationship, especially when defining beauty and nature. “What is art? An imitation of nature,” writes Bach’s student Lorenz Christoph Mizler in the same year and place as Birnbaum’s defense of Bach. It follows, then, that musical structure—harmonia, in the terminology of Bach’s time—ultimately refers to the order of nature and to its divine cause. Or, put more lyrically, “Music is a mixed mathematical science that concerns the origins, attributes, and distinctions of sound, out

\[359\] See 3.2.3.
of which a cultivated and lovely melody and harmony are made, so that God is honored and praised but mankind is moved to devotion, virtue, joy, and sorrow.”

It might seem, at this point, that Wolff’s construal is devastating for any account (such as this) that seeks to draw a line of aesthetic influence from Luther to Bach. After all, here we find an artistic theory based on the teachings of Aristotle (a figure Luther fiercely criticized), transmitted through time and space to a Catholic musical figure like Fux, and also bearing similarity to a dictum of another Aristotelian Catholic who Luther likewise criticized: Thomas Aquinas. According to this possible reading, Bach’s own artistic theory did not come from Luther, but from some of the very figures Luther rebuked.

This sort of reading, however, fails to account for two important things. First, Luther did not reject Aristotelian philosophy wholesale. Take, for example, one of his most vicious attacks on Aristotle in his 1520 “Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate.” “In this regard,” he writes, “my advice would be that Aristotle’s Physics, Metaphysics, On the Soul, and Ethics, which have hitherto been thought his best books, should be altogether discarded.” He then proceeds to ridicule such books and their author, making sure to

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360 Wolff, 5.
362 Wolff himself does not propose this sort of reading; I am proposing a hypothetical reading based on his account.
remind his reader that he knows his Aristotle well. After all, shortly after this critical outburst, Luther shows his awareness of, and appreciation for, another set of Aristotle’s books: “I should be glad to see Aristotle’s books on Logic, Rhetoric and Poetics retained or used in an abridged form as text-books for the profitable training of young people in speaking and preaching.” And there, in the Poetics, one would find Aristotle’s most developed articulation of “mimesis,” or “art imitating nature,” the very idea we find Birnbaum expressing in his debate with Scheibe. When it comes to the relationship between art and nature, Bach certainly could have appropriated an Aristotelian principle through Luther.

Second, while Luther was a Catholic theologian himself, his criticisms of Aquinas were based on a shaky (at best) apprehension of Thomist theology. As David Steinmetz argues in his essay “What Luther Got Wrong,” at the time of Luther there were at least three distinct versions of Thomism on offer: the Augustinian Thomism of Capreolus, the Aristotelian Thomism of Cajetan, and the Occamist Thomism of Biel. While debates between adherents of the former two versions rage on, the Bielian version that influenced Luther has been strongly discredited as a faithful interpretation of Aquinas. Moreover, even if Luther’s apprehension of Thomist theology were accurate, his critiques are directed at Aquinas’ alleged Pelagianism, a soteriological problem that has only a

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364 “Let no one accuse me of exaggeration, or of condemning what I do not understand! My dear friend, I know well whereof I speak. I know my Aristotle as well as you or the likes of you. I have lectured on him and heard lectures on him, and I understand him better than do St. Thomas or Scotus,” Ibid.

365 Ibid.


367 In this vein, see: Lawrence J. Murphy, “Gabriel Biel as Transmitter of Aquinas to Luther.” New Series 7, no. 1 (February 1983): 26-41.
tangential relationship to art. Therefore, if a line of influence could be traced from Aquinas to Fux and then to Birnbaum/Bach, it would not necessarily need to be drawn contra-Luther.

Having now shown that Birnbaum’s invocation of an Aristotelian principle does not threaten the Bach-Luther connection I am arguing in favor of, let us proceed to clarify what the slippery word “nature” (Natur) means in this context. Much of the “slipperiness” around this word comes from the manifold contexts in which it is used, but here we will be focusing on two specifically, which are deeply interrelated: a) the sphere of the non-human natural world, in which beings like the sun, moon, non-human animals, plants, and bodies of water exist, and b) the divinely created, in-built characteristics/properties of all things (both human and non-human together), which were instilled and implanted by God, such as the “nature” of strings when they vibrate or the “nature” of human song. I am including and focusing on these two contexts for the obvious reason that, in their own theological and musical writings, both Luther and Bach did so themselves. There are a multitude of other contexts potentially relevant to this discussion in which the word “nature” can be used, but those contexts are only tangentially – not essentially – connected to the idea of beauty in Bach-Luther studies. For the purposes of this dissertation, we will be focusing on two ways Bach apparently “imitates nature” in his artistic work: painting images from the natural world in music, and attending to the mathematical properties of sound.

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368 For example, Luther would not approve of artists attempting to justify or sanctify themselves through their artistic labor. That would be an attempt to beautify oneself, and would therefore make one ugly. He would, however, approve of artistic labor done freely in gratitude to God for already being justified. That is simply extending the beauty one has received from Christ toward others, an attempt to convince them to believe in the beauty of Christ.
As we saw in chapter two and three, Luther spilled much ink praising God for the beauty of “the natural world,” as seen in the sun, moon, trees, animals, bodies of water, etc…. It is quite possible – or perhaps even likely – that Luther’s embrace of the beauty of natural beings encouraged Bach to “imitate it” in his own musical work. This seems to be Albert Schweitzer’s interpretation of Bach, which he outlines in contrast to Wagner:

The difference between Wagner and Bach becomes most evident in their conceptions of natural events. Wagner conceives nature through his emotions; Bach – in this respect like Berlioz – through his imagination. Bach is not satisfied until he is sure that the hearer actually sees the dust of the whirlwind, the clouds scudding across the sky, the falling leaves, the raging waves. When his poets came to the end of their tether, all they had to do was to bring nature on the scene; they could be sure of satisfying him in this way.369

“Pictorial themes” and “pictorial representation” play an important role in Schweitzer’s analysis, and while some of his examples might elicit skepticism in certain readers, one simply cannot deny that Bach did sometimes try to paint natural things in musical form.

Among the rather straightforward examples of Bach’s natural tone painting, we should highlight a few with clear Christological relevance: in the St. Matthew Passion alone, we find serpentine movement on the word “Schlange” in “Blute nur” (movement eight), sheep “scattering” in the instrumental accompaniment when Jesus sings “und die Schafe der Herde werden sich zestreuen” (movement fourteen), swirling figures in both voice and instruments when Jesus sings “und kommen in den Wolken des Himmels,” (movement thirty-six) and the rumbling of the earthquake in the continuo shortly after Jesus dies. Many more examples from elsewhere in his vocal oeuvre could be adduced,

but one natural being seems to have attracted his attention more than others, and it is one that Luther considered the most musical of all non-human beings: the bird.

In many places in his vocal work, Bach uses music to imitate the nature of birds, whether of their song or of their flight. Take, for example, the way Bach uses the cock’s crow in the *St. Matthew Passion*. In describing the events surrounding Peter’s denial, the evangelist quite literally mimics the cock’s ascending crow on the word “krähen.” In other places, Bach imitates the nature of bird flight, often using it to express theological meaning. In movement 4 of BWV 27, for example, the soprano soloist longs to enter heaven (*Ach, wer doch schon im Himmel wär!*) and Bach gives her instrumental wings an upward, heavenly trajectory in between her pleading articulations (Flügel her!). In movement 5 of BWV 37, Bach draws the melismatic flight of “faith’s wings” on the word “Flügel” multiple times, which Andre Pirro describes as “the brief soaring of a bird that tries out its skill for flying, shakes its wings, advances a little, rests, and then rises again.” He mimics the flight of wings (Flügel) melismatically in many other places as well, such as the third movement of BWV 137, and the aria “Eilt, ihr angefochtnen

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370 This bit of musical mimesis comes just before the celebrated transition from the evangelist’s “und weinete bitterlich” and the alto/countertenor aria “Erbarme Dich” (movement 47). John Butt has claimed that another form of musical “imitation” is also at play here: “Most obvious here would be the prominent minor sixths relating to Peter’s denial and the crowing cock in the Matthew Passion, perhaps also heard in extended form as a diminished seventh during the representation of Peter’s weeping. Immediately following this comes the aria ‘Erbarme Dich,’ which is based so very prominently on the rising minor sixth. There is no doubt something uncanny about this in relation to the unfolding of events: Peter knew that he was going to deny Christ three times, even if he had forgotten; his last denial is mimicked directly by the Evangelist’s announcement of the cock crow, transposed up a fifth, as if the two were related as cause and effect.” Butt, *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity*, 138.


372 Schweitzer argues that “there is a very characteristic theme in the cantata *Schwingt freudig euch empor*, resembling the beating of wings. We have the same oscillations in
“Seelen” from the *St. John Passion*. In a slightly different vein, John Eliot Gardiner claims that we can perceive the flight of the Holy Spirit (as a dove) in one of Bach’s baptismal cantatas: BWV 7. Gardiner claims that movement 4, “*Der Geist erschien im Bild der Tauben,*” is an aria that “describes, through its pair of soaring violins, the circling flight of the Holy Spirit as a dove.” We might even add that, in this aria, Bach gives the word “Tauben” ascending melismas multiple times. The melismatic string figures in the soprano chorale (movement 3) of BWV 166 very likely also represent the soul as a bird flying toward heaven out of its nest (*aus ihrem Nest*). In movement 5 of BWV 46, we read that human beings are Jesus’ “little chicks” (*Küchlein*), while hearing “the hovering of those flutes – serene at first, but later fluttering like wounded birds.”

A second way in which Bach “imitates nature” is through his careful attention to the mathematical properties of sound. According to his son Carl Philipp Emanuel, Bach was “no lover of dry mathematical stuff.” But Carl’s inclusion of the adjective “dry” could well suggest the possibility that there was indeed a form of “mathematical stuff” that Bach did love. After all, even despite the many fanciful speculations about Bach’s numerology that have long been discredited, few (if any) scholars would deny that Bach’s music displays the presence of a highly sophisticated mathematical mind at

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375 NBR, 398.
Moreover, even a cursory look into Bach’s biography reveals an artist who was intensely interested in the mathematical detail of music, from the small fluctuations of frequencies involved in tuning to the various ratios involved in organ maintenance and repair. While it may be true that Bach found abstract musical speculations “dry” or boring (and he did take his time in joining Mizler’s Society of Musical Science), it is also true that Bach was a fan of “less dry” forms of “mathematical stuff.”

Perhaps musical mathematics becomes “less dry” to someone like Bach when it is framed in light of theologically loaded concepts like “nature,” “order,” and “beauty.” Indeed, such is the theological importance of number for Luther, who (as we saw in chapter two) claimed that Adam’s prelapsarian body was perfectly proportioned (and therefore perfectly beautiful), and that the survival of numbers even after “the fall” was a sign that divine order still existed in nature. In musical terms, this also meant that Luther could embrace the Pythagorean tradition of musical numerology, in which consonant ratios reflect divine order in nature.

Bach was also surely aware of Pythagoras, his elevated position in Lutheran theology, and the centrality of musical mathematics to Lutheran notions of divine order and beauty in nature. Wolff makes this clear:

According to both Pythagorean philosophical doctrine and medieval theology, the harmony of the spheres produced consonant (if hidden) music, which reflected the perfection of the celestial world—a view that neither Kepler nor Newton disputed, leaving it one of the few fundamental

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377 See 2.2.3.
378 In the *Encomium Musices*, Luther is very close to the Pythagorean tradition when he says “from the beginning of the world music has been instilled and implanted…” in a section where he discusses harmony and sound (*numero sonoro*) vibrating in air. LW 55:324.
truths still upheld by both philosophers and theologians of Bach’s time…
As Georg Venzky, like Bach a member of Lorenz Christoph Mizler’s Society of Musical Science, put it, “God is a harmonic being. All harmony originates from his wise order and organization… Where there is no conformity, there is also no order, no beauty, and no perfection. For beauty and perfection consists in the conformity of diversity.”

The idea of “conformity of diversity” is even more theological than Wolff explicitly states here, since by the time of Bach musical harmony had long been associated with the presence of divine order in nature. Music was created through the agency of Christ, according to Luther, but Christ is fundamentally the second person of a Tri-Unity of divine persons. The harmony of three distinct pitches resounding as one major consonance, then, can also be seen as the presence of perfect divine beauty in nature.

Indeed, the basic claim of Ruth Tatlow’s *Bach’s Numbers* is that Bach organized his musical compositions according to the whole number ratios that represent divine order in nature.

Bach may have tidied up his compositions so that they would reflect divine order, but why, then, were so many of them filled with such obviously disordered musical ratios? Why are the Passions and sacred cantatas especially rife with half steps, tritones, and harmonic suspensions? Why was Bach so intensely interested in that which is musically “ungestalt”? The answer, it seems, has everything to do with the beauty of “musical nature” itself, and what happened to it after the sin of Adam and Eve.

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380 Wolff, 466.
381 For Augustine’s construal of this relationship, see 1.1.3.
4.3.3) Bach and the Fallen Beauty of Nature

We recall, from section 3.2.4, that according to Luther, nature (both human and non-human) was deformed and misshapen by sin. The original perfect beauty of Eden has not disappeared, according to him, but it has been severely damaged. In musical terms, this means damage to nature in three ways relevant to a Lutheran musician like Bach: a) damage to the beauty of musical nature itself, such that dissonances now exist, b) damage to the beauty of human nature, such that human beings now have disordered passions that can distort music (especially being prideful about one’s own musical work), and c) damage to the relationship between human nature and musical nature, such that humans have now become “deaf” to what Pythagoras called the “harmony of the spheres.” We should not be surprised, then, to find traces of these ideas expressed by Bach in various ways.

Take, for example, the fallen beauty of musical nature. In his reply to Scheibe, Birnbaum echoes Luther when he argues that nature delivers things to us in the most “misshapen” (ungestalt) states. To use somewhat anachronistic terminology, it seems as though Birnbaum and Bach picked up from the Lutheran tradition the idea that because of the fall, musical nature had fallen into disorder.\(^\text{384}\) Luther seemed intuitively aware of this idea without ever articulating it explicitly (as we saw in the last chapter), but by the time of Bach, figures like Werckmeister (and others) had made it explicit.\(^\text{385}\) According to this tradition, we no longer live in a musical paradise, and although we can still experience

\(^{384}\) See 3.2.4. \\
^{385}\) See 3.3.3.
remnants of its perfect beauty, we now live in a world in which music, like humanity, has fallen. If in Eden Adam had limbs of perfectly beautiful proportion and his music was perfectly consonant, after the fall our bodies are now disfigured and our music has become dissonant.

We also know that Bach believed that organs could potentially be in perfect working order, and that he revered at least one of them for its beauty, but in his manifold reports on their various maintenance needs, he also described their defects at length. He reports a variety of problems, from the general effect of soot on the quality of sound to the most minor mathematical adjustments necessary to produce working harmony. Without clean, regulated pipes, the music thus produced would not be harmonious, meaning it would not connect and alternate consonances and dissonances. Instead, it would likely be what Bach called a “devilish hubbub,” a series of chaotic dissonances with no consonant order. Moreover, Bach’s evident interest in temperament can be understood in this context as well. Temperament, like organ repair, is a way of making defects in natural music more amenable to the purposes of art.389

386 “The new organist, Mr. Bach, had observed various defects in the organ of the Church of St. Blasius and had submitted in writing a project for remedying them and perfecting the instrument.” NBR, 55. Or, in Bach’s own writing: “The great and costly organ in the Collegiate Church of St. Martin, or the so-called Great Church, on which work has been going on for almost three years, has finally been adapted to the mode of today and brought to perfection.” NBR, 155.
387 Ibid., 38.
388 NBR, 55, 76, 83, and 86.
389 See 3.3.3, for example. Bach and Werckmeister were interested in temperament because they believed that musical nature had fallen into forms of disorder. One could not simply use Pythagorean numerology to produce working tuning systems; the systems had to be adjusted, or “tempered,” to become amenable to artistic work (especially modulation, which Bach used to such profound effect). One could tune a keyboard to Pythagorean/just temperament, but he or she would only be able to play it well in one
Bach also exhibits an awareness of another basic principle of Lutheran aesthetics: the fall of human nature, and especially its affective life. Dark passions recur thematically throughout the various Lutheran texts Bach set in his vocal music, but Birnbaum makes Bach’s understanding of fallen human nature even clearer in his reply to Scheibe. Echoing Niedt (and Bach himself) on dissonance, Birnbaum argues that “the true amenity of music consists in the connection and alternation of consonances and dissonances without hurt to the harmony. The nature of music demands this. The various passions, especially the dark ones, cannot be expressed with fidelity to Nature without this alternation.”

Because of the fall of Adam and Eve, it seems, human nature has become less beautiful, and its affective life has become darker and more dissonant. Moreover, Bach expresses something along these lines when he defines music as “an agreeable harmony to the glory of God and the permissible delights of the soul.” This definition implies that there are im-permissible delights of the soul, perhaps those that might arise from the devilish glorification of dissonance itself.

The fallen conditions of musical nature and human nature coincide, however, both in Lutheran theology and in Bach’s own working life. For Luther, the full beauty of musical nature is no longer available to us; we have become “deaf” to what Pythagoras called the “harmony of the spheres.” Bach seems to have been aware of this claim, considering his zeal for investigating the previously unexplored regions of the harmonic key. A “well-tempered” system, which is what Bach desired, and especially our modern “equal-tempered” system, navigate key changes much better than just temperament.

390 NBR, 343, italics added for emphasis.
391 Ibid., 16-17.
392 See 3.2.3 and 3.2.4.
series, what Agricola called the “hidden secrets of harmony.” Human beings are naturally deaf to the hidden beauty of the harmony of the spheres, but through scientific inquiry, we can gain a fuller hearing of it and display it in artistic sound. Perhaps this explains why Bach was such a passionate “musical scientist,” in Wolff’s words, who submitted an application to the Dresden court with the words: “To Your Royal Highness I submit in deepest devotion the present small work of that science which I have achieved in musique, with the most wholly submissive prayer that Your Highness will look upon it with Most Gracious Eyes.” Through scientific investigation and art, the harmonies that we have become deaf to can be made audible. Indeed, given Luther’s claim that Christians can listen to artistic music over and over again with pleasure, we might think of Bach as someone who wanted to transform the boring repetition of “natural music” into the ever-stimulating repetition of artistic music. And anyone who has spent hours, days, or weeks studying a single movement within a single cantata knows that Bach’s music is especially ripe for repeated pleasurable listening.

From Luther and various Lutherans, Bach inherited a robust conception of music’s “fallenness.” Musical nature had fallen into various forms of dissonance, human nature had fallen such that it could abuse music for its own sinful purposes, and the relationship between human nature and musical nature had been ruptured so deeply that human beings have become “deaf” to the full beauty of music. For Luther, the only way these damages can be healed and redeemed is through an act of the Creator in creation:

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393 NBR, 305.
394 Wolff, Prologue.
395 NBR, 158.
396 “We often sing a good song over again from the beginning, especially one we have sung with pleasure and joy.” Quoted in 3.2.5.
only Christ, the second person of the Trinity, can raise fallen nature into the beautiful creation it was intended to be. As we will now see, Bach must have embraced these ideas and decided to give them new and beautiful expression.

4.3.4) Bach and the Beautiful Light of Christ

In general, Bach must have considered it his duty to explore even the “flawed” and “incomplete” parts of the harmonic series and thus expand the range of possible dissonances one might use in artistic composition. One of the most remarkable aspects of Bach’s art, however, is that his expansive use of dissonance always seems to serve a purpose. Bach did “emancipate dissonance,” to borrow a term from Schoenberg, but not for its own sake. Bach emancipated certain dissonances for certain artistic ends – such as being able to “express” (literally “pushed out,” “ausdrücken” in Birnbaum’s usage) even darker passions than any Lutheran composer before him. For Bach always referred his musical art to its supervening theological ends, and thus always sought to shine the consonant light of Christ into the dark and dissonant regions of nature. Only then, according to the logic of Lutheran aesthetics, could music participate in the full beauty of Christ’s redemption of the cosmos.

Recall that according to Luther, true beauty is supremely and centrally defined by the redemptive life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Christ, the one through

397 Schoenberg introduced this term in his 1926 essay “Opinion and Insight,” and applied it to Bach in various ways, such as his joke that “Bach is the first composer with twelve tones.” Arnold Schoenberg, Style and Idea, Leonard Stein, ed., trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 393.

398 For the full German text of Birnbaum’s reply, see 1.1.2.
whom the world was created becomes a created being in order to redeem all of that creation from its fall into sin and imperfection. Thus Christ’s incarnation in first-century Israel represents a watershed moment in the historical drama of Lutheran aesthetics: now the beautiful Creator is known as a beautiful creature whose resurrection shines radiant light into the darkened places of fallen nature. And in Lutheran aesthetics, it is the task of the musician to intimate the beauty of that redemption by expressing – and then resolving – dark dissonances into bright consonances. Then the devil, who instigated the fall of nature, can be driven out. The beautiful light of Christ shines in consonant victory over the devil and all of his dark dissonances.

Such is the aesthetic framework Bach inherited, and he likely considered it his personal duty to exploit the musical space opened up by it. It seems that Bach was not particularly interested – if even interested at all – in challenging the basic doctrinal tenets of Lutheran aesthetics. What interested him, and what probably even obsessed him, was finding unprecedented musical ways of expressing a basic doctrinal tenet he inherited from Luther: that Christ’s redemption of the cosmos defines true beauty. As I will now show, Bach seized upon Luther’s aesthetic celebration of musical freedom, and used it as a theological license to explore the cutting edge of musical science and art: the latest musical forms of other European countries, untrodden regions of the harmonic series, or the latest innovations in organ technology, to take a few examples. We therefore should think of Bach as theologically traditional and musically innovative, with musical innovation serving traditional theological ends.

Bach’s aesthetic exploitation of the free musical space Luther authorized took a variety of forms, two of which we will focus on here: First, we will see that Bach used
contrapuntal art to augment the beauty of existing hymns and chorales in the Lutheran musical tradition. To borrow an analogy from athletic competition, here we often find Bach injecting the simple melodies of Luther with polyphonic steroids; with Bach’s pen, what were measly little tunes became immense works of polyphonic art. For example, Luther’s “Nun Komm der Heiden Heiland” survives intact in Bach’s BWV 61 and 62, but now with a multitude of voices dancing around it polyphonically and therefore augmenting its beauty. Second, and more specifically, we can see Bach greatly expanding the range of possible dissonances in the traditional tonal language of Lutheran music. Before Bach, only a figure such as Gesualdo had dared to venture as far into the dark regions of the harmonic series, and he cannot be considered a member of the Lutheran musical tradition. Compared to bona fide Lutheran musical figures Bach learned from such as Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707) or Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672), or even his own contemporaries such as Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767), Bach’s use of dissonance sounds remarkably bold, if not perhaps even musically transgressive. What I hope to show, however, is that Bach’s use of dissonance was precisely the opposite of transgressive. Bach expanded the range of acceptable dissonances within his tradition not because he thought “that the world is filth and horror, that humans are helpless, that life is pain,” as Richard Taruskin has claimed; he did so because he wanted to “drive the devil out” of the human soul, which Luther considered both a primary function of music and the fulcrum around which his conception of theological aesthetics turns.

399 Carlo Gesualdo (1566-1613) was an Italian Renaissance composer whose tonal language and personal life share a provocative darkness. He killed his wife and her paramour in flagrante, and his striking uses of chromaticism certainly convey a bold, even transgressive, spirit.

4.3.5) Bach’s Aesthetic Use of Lutheran Hymnody

In the world of Lutheran aesthetics, any string of notes that forms a melody would be considered naturally beautiful, and further harmonization of those melodies would be considered an augmentation of that beauty. Thus we find Bach augmenting the beauty of a variety of given melodies, from the rather misshapen one Frederick the Great offered him to the highly singable established tunes of the Lutheran musical tradition.\footnote{Bach was also apparently interested in beautifying even the ugliest of melodies, as Birnbaum suggests when he argues that “many things are delivered to us by nature in the most misshapen states, which, however, acquire the most beautiful appearance when they have been formed by art.”} But nothing attracted Bach’s aesthetic interest quite like the melodies of the Lutheran musical tradition.

While it is certainly true that writing music in that tradition was a basic requirement of his work life, it is also true that Bach continually sought out Lutheran church positions when many other (non-ecclesial) musical opportunities were available to someone of his talents and achievements,\footnote{Consider, for example, Bach’s various experiences in Hamburg (e.g. visiting Georg Böhm and Johann Adam Reinken (Wolff, 60-66), and seeking the vacant post of organist of St. Jacobi’s church there (Wolff, 211-215) and his apparent lack of interest in its thriving opera scene. Bach’s obituary also “makes no mention of the Hamburg opera or its conductor” (Wolff, 65).} and that Bach’s new artistic renderings of the music of that tradition clearly required a massive investment of time and energy that would simply be impossible for the half-hearted. The Lutheran church music we receive

\footnote{For my discussion of Bach’s treatment of Frederick’s theme, see 1.2.10.}

\footnote{NBR, 343.}
from Bach bears no marks of boredom or resignation – quite the opposite. Instead, it bears the marks of someone who loved the music he inherited and wanted to make it even more beautiful.\(^{404}\)

One of the main ways Bach made the Lutheran musical tradition more beautiful is by augmenting its melodies (as a *cantus firmus*) and filling in that augmented space with polyphonic ornamentation. In general, augmentation simply means making something greater in size or amount. In more specific musical terms, it means elongating a melody so that the new note values last longer in time than the previous ones. Yet the sense of “making something greater in size or amount” does not only apply to the elongated melody; it also applies to the very goal of augmentation, which is allowing greater time and space for new forms of harmony. Bach did not augment the melodies of his tradition solely because he wanted them to last longer within a specific musical piece; he augmented them because their slower form invited, or at least allowed for, new forms of polyphonic musical expression. Put simply, he augmented them so that he could fulfill a basic precept of Lutheran aesthetics: the fuller the musical harmony, the more beautiful it is. Let us take a few examples of Bach’s usage of the resources of this tradition, both from Luther himself and from faithful representatives of his thought.

\(^{404}\) For evidence of Bach’s personal interest in church work (against Blume, as we shall see in 4.3.8), see Leaver, “Music and Lutheranism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 36-40. According to Leaver, Bach was “in many respects a typical middle-class Lutheran of the first half of the eighteenth century who had a particular attachment to the writings of Martin Luther” (Leaver, 40). This claim aligns with one of the minor claims of this chapter, namely that Bach’s quarrels with other church workers should be explained not by a special dislike of church work itself, but by his frustration with the decay of proper Lutheran theology in those environments, wherein music should hold an extremely privileged position. See also: C. Trautmann, “J.S. Bach: New Light on His Faith,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42 (1971): 88-99.
Bach apparently took quite a liking to one of Luther’s most famous hymns, “Nun Kommt der Heiden Heiland,” such that he used it as the basis for two distinct cantatas and four distinct chorale preludes in which he “carefully suited his music to the mood and meaning of the text... where the text itself was not presented with the music, though it was familiar to the congregation.” In the opening choruses of both BWV 61 and 62, Bach takes the basic melody of Luther’s hymn and augments it in multiple voices with differing instrumental accompaniment, thus generating two dramatically different polyphonic settings in the process. Dotted rhythms in the strings open BWV 61 as a chorale fantasia, which sets up the instrumental background for the entrance of Luther’s melody in augmented form, passed from one voice to another in turn. The simultaneous juxtaposition of clipped string articulations with an augmented cantus firmus creates such a striking contrast that each voice enters on the downbeat with dramatic flair. This is royal French music, ceremonially fit for presenting a king to his subjects. On the other hand, BWV 62 opens up in 6/4 time, with contrasting subjects in the strings and oboes and no continuo in the first two measures, only for the first violin to fly away in measure three just as Luther’s melody enters in the continuo. That melody is passed around the voices, as is highly typical in Bach, but here the voices imitate each other at irregular intervals with the soprano cantus firmus soaring above their intricate counterpoint. This musical affect, not nearly as stately as the first example, conveys a much more frenzied, festive sense of excitement. Taken together, these two opening choruses represent two

\[405 \text{NBR, 18.}\]
distinct polyphonic approaches to a simple Lutheran melody, two innovative attempts at displaying the latent harmonic beauty hidden inside of it.\textsuperscript{406}

Yet Bach’s aesthetic use of Luther’s hymn does not terminate at the harmonic level; even the texts involved testify to the beauty of the one through whom music was created, Christ himself. Luther’s original text (from Ambrose) calls for the listener to marvel that the Lord chose such a humble birth (\textit{dass sich wunder alle Welt, // Gott solch Geburt ihm bestellt}). Moreover, the text for the second movement of BWV 61 refers to Christ allowing his light to shine full of blessing (\textit{Du kommst und läßt dein Licht, // Mit vollem Segen scheinen}.) Finally, Bach concludes BWV 61 with a snippet of text from Nicolai’s “\textit{Wie schön}” hymn, which uses explicit aesthetic imagery to hint at the meaning of Christ’s incarnation: the “beautiful crown of joy” that Christ wears on the cross and that every believer cannot wait to receive (\textit{Komm, du schöne Freudenkrone, bleib nicht lange! // Deiner wart ich mit Verlangen}). Likewise, BWV 62 involves a variety of aesthetic texts that build on Luther’s original: movement two calls for the listener to marvel at the great mystery that the highest ruler appears to the world (\textit{Bewundert, o Menschen, dies große Geheimnis: // Der höchste Beherrscher erscheinet der Welt}), movement three refers to Christ’s incarnation as a brilliant, radiant light that blesses us (\textit{O heller Glanz, o wunderbarer Segenschein!}) and the fifth movement claims that darkness will not confuse us because of Christ’s eternal light (\textit{Die Dunkelheit verstört’ uns nicht, // Und sahen dein unendlich Licht}). Yet Bach did not only take an aesthetic

\textsuperscript{406} Wolff calls the opening chorus of BWV 61, based on Luther’s hymn, one of Bach’s “highly innovative settings,” a “chorale elaboration in overture style.” Wolff, 166.
interest in vocal music written directly by Luther himself; he was also interested in doing
the same with the vocal texts of Lutheran theologians such as Nicolai and others.\footnote{For my discussion of Nicolai, see 3.3.2.}

Consider, for example, Bach’s rendering of Nicolai’s hymn “Wie schön leuchtet
der Morgenstern” into his own cantata, BWV 1. The opening chorus is built around
Bach’s augmentation of Nicolai’s melody, which stretches throughout the movement in
the soprano voice as a cantus firmus. Around that augmented melody dance the other
three choral voices, which are all enveloped by thickly textured instrumental polyphony
that permeates the entire movement. Or take BWV 140, Bach’s rendering of Nicolai’s
other most famous hymn, “Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme.” Bach augments Nicolai’s
melody and fills in that added time and space with choral harmony, often using the
opportunity to paint words like “hoch” as the climax to an ascending theme or “wach
auf” and “steht auf” as ascending intervals to convey a sense of waking up or rising up.
Many more examples could be adduced within that chorus alone, and we could add many
other Bach cantatas that involve the polyphonic augmentation of Lutheran hymns (such
as BWV 192, Bach’s rendering of Lutheran minister Martin Rinckart’s hymn “Nun
danket alle Gott”), but the point should be clear: Bach dramatically augmented the beauty
of various hymns of the Lutheran tradition by harmonizing their simple melodies both
chorally and instrumentally.

Yet in his description of the beauty of harmony, Birnbaum does not specifically
claim that there is nothing more beautiful than solely consonant harmony – he only says
harmony. And given that he includes dissonance in his definition of harmony in multiple
places (and that Bach’s treatment of the Lutheran hymns discussed above involves so
much dissonance),\textsuperscript{408} it seems that according to Birnbaum (and presumably Bach), there is nothing more beautiful in the world than the polyphonic resolution of dissonance into consonance. In fact, Birnbaum even praises the composer who knows “how to introduce a dissonance skillfully and resolve it adroitly.”\textsuperscript{409} In the context of Lutheran aesthetics, such a claim is charged with theological import.

First, recall from chapter two that Luther adhered to the “fall of nature” tradition in theology, wherein the musical phenomenon of dissonance can be understood as a “fall” from the perfect consonance enjoyed by Adam and Eve in their pre-lapsarian state.\textsuperscript{410} Now, according to Luther, did God “introduce” evil and its effects (such as dissonance) in order to resolve it adroitly? Here Luther cautions against trying to peer behind the divine veil in an “over curious way,”\textsuperscript{411} while also trying to make sense of the existence of evil in the context of divine providence. Accordingly, he is attracted to an image of God as the “master artist,” whose masterpiece (redeemed creation) includes but ultimately subsumes sin and evil. Hence his usage of the “master artist” image in the context of divine creation:

Augustine sets forth two opinions about the moon in the beginning of the 12th Psalm, and in his discussions he forces an allegory upon the church,

\textsuperscript{408} Birnbaum includes dissonance in his definition of harmony multiple times, such as when he claims that “the true amenity of music consists in the connection and alternation of consonances and dissonances without hurt to the harmony,” (\textit{NBR}, 243) and when he contrasts “insipid little ditties” with how “pleasing the harmony is” when a consonant-dissonant alternation occurs (ibid).

\textsuperscript{409} \textit{NBR}, 343.

\textsuperscript{410} See 2.2.4 and 3.2.4.

\textsuperscript{411} “In the foregoing I observed that we do not understand the order of the works of God. Had he therefore asked us our opinion here we should have advised him to use such an order as to add the sentence now in question to the work of the second day. But God will ever be master of his own order and the ruler of the world. Wherefore we ought not to be over curious here.” \textit{LW} 1:87.
while he himself defines nothing. But I leave this; for from astronomers as from master artists we most readily learn what points are possible to be disputed in this science. I am satisfied that in these bodies so glorious and useful for our life we discern the goodness and power of God, who created such things by his Word and conserved them to the present day for our use. These are matters belonging to our calling or profession; that is, they are theological themes, and they have the efficacy to comfort and strengthen our hearts.412

The point, it seems, is that just as a master artist can tell us what can and cannot be disputed in his art, so can God tell us what is undisputed in his art: the gloriousness and usefulness of the bodies in his creation (such as the moon, the body that launched this analogy). Furthermore, that “glory and use” is expressed in a theo-dramatic way: “by his Word,” God “conserved them to the present day,” Luther writes. The “present day” for Luther is long after Adam and Eve, and the idea of “conservation” only makes sense in a post-lapsarian world that includes death. No one needs to “conserve” anything in a pre-lapsarian world.

Luther’s most developed conception of God as a “master artist” comes from his Lectures on Romans, where he again relates divine and human artistry. Anttila sums it up as follows:

The aesthetic dimension of the doctrine of justification is displayed with an image of an artist; Luther says that an artist does not become established as a good artist merely by criticizing the work of others. Instead, when an artist is compared to others and seen to be more experienced, he/she can be called a good artist. Finally, a master artist is the one who can teach his skills to others and help them become good artists. In brief, God acts like a master artist and shows his beauty by making us beautiful.413

412 LW 1:96.
413 Anttila, Luther’s Theology of Music: Spiritual Beauty and Pleasure, 169.
God does not exercise his artistry merely by creating good and useful things like the moon (as we saw above). He exercises master artistry by sharing his goodness and beauty with those who do not possess it. This free gift of justification, this happy exchange of human sinfulness for divine righteousness, is the fulcrum of God’s masterpiece. In this beautiful work of art, those who deserve hell instead receive the New Jerusalem.

As a faithful Lutheran, Bach certainly would not have thought that he could **earn** justification through his own effort. However, he certainly may have considered his musical output to be a free expression of his theological convictions. When a human being accepts Christ’s beautiful gift of justification, then, he or she might sing an aria like “*Ich bin herrlich, ich bin schön*” (BWV 49). But more specifically, a Lutheran musical composer like Bach might decide to introduce (and then resolve) his own dissonances, so that his listeners might gain a foretaste of the heavenly beauty God has in store for them.

### 4.3.6) Bach and the Beauty of the Cross

In order for the “happy exchange” of human sinfulness for divine righteousness to occur, however, Christ must die on the cross. As we saw throughout chapter two, Luther concentrates his aesthetic thought on this moment, when the beauty of God’s love is revealed in proportion to the ugliness Christ suffers. For Luther, true beauty is not simply the perfection of Eden, where Adam’s limbs were perfectly proportioned and people sang and played in perfect consonant harmony. For him, true beauty is the “new Adam” and his redemption of the fallen cosmos, Christ’s victory over the devil and all the dissonances he caused in nature by tricking Adam and Eve. Without ever stating this
connection explicitly, Luther has committed himself to the position that music is especially beautiful *because* it can “drive out the devil,” and Bach must have considered it one of his tasks to use whatever musical means available to participate in that beautiful mission.

In the first place, Bach did not augment the melodies of Lutheran hymns solely to harmonize them with consonance; some of his most wrenching dissonances come in cantatas built on those augmented Lutheran hymns. Even just within the cantatas analyzed above, we can sample various Christological uses of dissonance: a) the opening minor-second dissonance between E (the E-minor tonic in the continuo) and D# (in the first violin) in “Siehe, siehe, ich stehe vor der Tür” of BWV 61, apparently intended to spook the listener into wondering who the knocking person is. Bach then gradually relieves that dissonant tension into the happy security of G-major as the intentions of the knocking person become known (simply to share dinner/Eucharist with him), b) in movement five of BWV 62, the descending tritone on “die Dunkelheit” to convey the darkness that will not destroy us given Christ’s “unendlich Licht,” and c) in the fifth movement of BWV 140, the bass soloist sings in *vox Christi* that Christ will “delight your troubled eye” (*und dein betrübtes Aug’ ergötzen*) with a harsh minor-second interval between B-flat and C-flat on the word “betrübte,” replete with harmonically tense instrumental accompaniment. Yet Bach’s musical interest in the devil’s dissonance – and Christ’s victory over it – is even more explicit than this. He makes it clear on a textual level that he wants to use music to drive the devil out of the human soul.

### 4.3.7) Music Drives out the Devil
“The devil appeals strongly to the musician in Bach,” Schweitzer writes. “As he is represented in the opening chapters of the Bible as a serpent, Bach always delineates him by means of a contorted motive. According to his theology, Satan is identical with the devil; therefore whenever the “evil one” is spoken of as Satan he introduces the twistings of the serpent.” This should not surprise us, given Bach’s evident interest in painting the nature of things in music (as we observed above, and as Schweitzer catalogues extensively). What may surprise us, however, is that Bach’s musical treatment of the devil goes much deeper than these contorted motives. Indeed, Bach apparently lavished a tremendous amount of musical attention on one of the key claims of Lutheran aesthetics: that music can participate in the beauty of Christ’s redemption by driving the devil and his dissonance out of the human soul.

Take, for example, the fourth movement of BWV 126, a rage aria for bass solo. Bach immediately has the continuo literally throw the pride of the enemy down, with the singer following suit on the words “Stürze zu Boden” (Throw to the ground). When the text shifts to “Laß sie den Abgrund plötzlich verschlingen” in the B-section, Bach hones in on the word “verschlingen” with a chromatically inflected melisma, and then when the word “toben” arrives, Bach gives the singer a classic rage melisma that climaxes on F-natural after a series of F-sharps an octave lower, generating a harsh minor-second dissonance in the singer’s melodic memory. Here we find Bach giving the singer musical time and space to vent, to rage at the devil so he will be purged from the singer’s (and presumably listener’s) soul.

Or consider the fourth movement of BWV 40, “Höllische Schlange,” another aria for bass solo. The key is D-minor, which sets up the consonant framework against which Bach introduces various dissonances, such as the abrupt F-sharp that ends the opening theme. Bach clearly wants the listener to hear the hellish dissonant sounds of Satan, who appears in nature as a Schlange. But he also then sets up a striking tonal contrast with theological significance: after Christ crushes the head of the hellish snake, the lost ones are thus delighted with eternal peace (werden mit ewigem Frieden beglückt), and Bach gives the singer a consonant “A” on “ewigem,” held for over three measures to convey a sense of eternity, and a consonant “D” on “Frieden” to convey a sense of harmonic peace.

Moreover, when unrepentant sinners turn away from Christ (and thereby make themselves ugly), Bach uses dissonance to warn them of their hellish state. In the terms of Luther’s Encomium Musices, here Bach is using music to “humble the proud.” In BWV 90, for example, Bach uses minor-seconds early and often, beginning with the very first theme in movement one, which begins with D-C#-D. As the movements unfold, we find minor-seconds on a variety of words associated with the devil’s intrusion into the human soul: “Sünden” (sins), “böser Schade” (evil shame), “den Greuel” (wrath) and “mörderisch Haus” (murderous house) especially. Given the textual focus on hell and sin, the tonal atmosphere of this cantata is unmistakably and appropriately dark. However, even in the midst of all these unpleasant words and dissonant settings of them, Bach cannot resist tonally expressing Christ’s victory over the devil. Movement three opens in a celebratory mood, with a trumpet blasting ascending figures in B-flat major. The

415 LW 55:323.
trumpet signals the Last Judgment, where unrepentant sinners, still captive to the devil within them, will face Christ’s righteous wrath. Christ continues to offer grace to them, as the text indicates (Des Höchsten Güte wird von Tag zu Tag neu, “the goodness of the highest becomes new day after day), but if they continue to turn away from him, the beautiful light of his Word will be extinguished in punishment (Den Leuchter des Wortes zur Strafe doch aus). The message is clear: Christ will defeat the devil, no matter how ugly and evil a human soul has become.

Yet when repentant sinners turn toward Christ (and thereby receive the beauty proper to him), Bach uses tonal contrasts to console them. Consider BWV 57, a cantata in which Jesus conquers the devil in a rather rambunctious fashion. The cantata begins with a musical rendering of James 1:12, a scriptural text focused on the “crown of life” that human beings will attain if they suffer through temptation as Jesus himself did. The soprano soloist wrestles in response, trying to find Jesus in her struggles as a “truly lost lamb” (ein recht verlaßnes Lam). Without the love of Jesus, the soul sings, it would only want to die. Thus Bach writes the aria “Ich wünschte mir den Tod,” in which he uses a host of minor-second intervals to convey the pain of death without Jesus. Apart from Jesus, death would remain ugly and dissonant. Yet in the recitative that follows, Jesus “reaches out his hand” (Ich reiche dir die Hand), and the soul responds with confidence that Jesus can really destroy the devil who has plagued human souls so powerfully (Du kannst die Feinde stürzen // Und ihren Grimm verkürzen.)

In the following aria, Bach responds to the soul’s anxiety by presenting Jesus as a musical superhero. The soul’s anxieties about death have suddenly evaporated; the victory of Jesus enters. In B-flat major, Bach has Jesus swoop in and slap the devil
around with melismatic panache. He even gives Jesus four punctuated articulations of the first syllable of the word “schlagen,” which generates an obvious “smacking” effect. The attentive listener should even be able to see Jesus roughing up the devil. Thus the soul should no longer complain to him (die dich nur stets bei mir verklagen) with minor-seconds. The B-section continues with a range of dissonances, such as a tritone on the first two syllables of “bedrängte Geist.” Who has oppressed the spirit? The devil. The rest of the B-section is full of these devilish dissonances, especially minor-seconds around the words “weinen” and “bedrängte.” Yet before returning to the triumphant beauty of Christ’s victory in the A-section, the text hints at the luminous character of that victory even in the midst of dark clouds: “Die Sonne wird noch helle scheinen, // Die dir itzt Kummerwolken weist.” The sun will shine again, and as the rambunctious consonance of the “A” section returns, Bach leaves no doubt that Christ reigns beautifully victorious in his musical world.

To take a final example, Bach even “drives the devil out” with explicit textual reference when he uses one of the harshest of intervallic dissonances: the tritone, often called the “devil in music” (diabolus in musica) in baroque music theory. In the recitative that precedes the sumptuous aria “Aus Liebe will mein Heiland Sterben,” Bach uses a tritone on the interval from “er” to “trieb” on the text “er trieb die Teufel fort,” or “he drove the devils forth.” However, listeners do not hear the tritone by itself or in abstraction. We hear it as a passing dissonance in the midst of oboe da caccias undulating gently in parallel thirds. We also hear it in the context of the overwhelmingly consonant Affekt (particularly on the word “Liebe) of the aria that follows.
From this, it should be clear that Bach intended to carry forward one of the basic aesthetic precepts of Lutheran theology: that music can drive the devil out of the human soul. But how exactly does it do so? Birnbaum offers one possible answer: there is, as Luther maintained, a correspondence between the darkness of musical nature and the darkness of the human soul. “The true amenity of music consists in the connection and alternation of consonances and dissonances without hurt to the harmony,” he writes. “The nature of music demands this. The various passions, especially the dark ones, cannot be expressed with fidelity to Nature without this alternation.”

The word here “to express” (ausgedrückten) is illuminating, since it literally means “pressed out,” or even “driven out.” In the big picture, then, Birnbaum’s response to Scheibe is this: the devil caused dissonances in otherwise perfectly beautiful nature, both human and musical, and music that resolves dissonance into consonance can drive the devil’s darkness out of the human soul. That is precisely what Luther wanted musicians to do, and precisely what Bach did.

4.3.8) Bach’s Defense of Luther against Scheibe and Ernesti

We can observe the influence of Lutheran aesthetics on Bachian aesthetics most precisely by juxtaposing snippets of text from Luther’s Encomium Musices and Birnbaum’s reply to Scheibe, which were written around two hundred years apart but are closely related conceptually:

But when [musical] learning is added to all this and artistic music which corrects, develops, and refines the natural music, then at last it is possible to taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God’s absolute and perfect

416 NBR, 343.
wisdom in his wondrous work of music. Here it is most remarkable that one single voice continues to sing the tenor, while at the same time many other voices play around it, exulting and adoring it in exuberant strains and, as it were, leading it forth in a divine roundelay, so that those who are the least bit moved know nothing more amazing in this world.\footnote{417}

This text of Luther’s becomes the basis for Birnbaum’s presentation of Bach’s artistic and aesthetic theory:

The essential aims of true art are to imitate nature, and, where necessary, to aid it. If art imitates nature, then indisputably the natural element must everywhere shine through in works of art. Accordingly it is impossible that art should take away the natural element from those things in which it imitates nature—including music. If art aids nature, then its aim is to preserve it, and to improve its condition; certainly not to destroy it. Many things are delivered to us by nature in the most misshapen states, which, however, acquire the most beautiful appearance when they have been formed by art. Thus art lends nature a beauty it lacks, and increases the beauty it possesses. Now, the greater the art is—that is, the more industriously and painstakingly it works at the improvement of nature—the more brilliantly shines the beauty thus brought into being. Accordingly it is impossible that the greatest art should darken the beauty of a thing.\footnote{418}

And:

It is certain, by the way, that the voices in the works of this great master of music work wonderfully in and about one another, but without the slightest confusion. They move along together or in opposition, as necessary. They part company, and yet all meet again at the proper time. Each voice distinguishes itself clearly from the others by a particular variation, although they often imitate each other. They now flee, now follow one another without one’s noticing the slightest irregularity in their efforts to outdo one another. Now, when all this is performed as it should be, there is nothing more beautiful than this harmony.\footnote{419}

The common features of these passages are too numerous to elucidate in full, but four are particularly relevant to this study: a) the recognition that musical nature has defects, b)
the claim that artistry can mend those defects, c) the subsequent claim that such an artistic product magnifies the beauty that remains in fallen musical nature, d) the celebration of one form of musical art – polyphony – as the most beautiful thing in the world.

These texts are strikingly similar, and the only significant difference is that while Luther makes the theological dimensions of musical beauty explicit (then at last it is possible to taste with wonder… God’s absolute and perfect wisdom in his wondrous work of music), Birnbaum restricts his response to the philosophical sphere alone, using only terms Scheibe initially introduced like “nature,” “beauty,” and “art.” Most significant in Birnbaum’s text, Butt argues, “is the total lack of any reference to God within Scheibe’s or Birnbaum’s writings.”⁴²⁰ One might therefore be tempted to cut off any proposed line of influence from one text to another, on the grounds that, in Bach’s Lutheran world, theological and philosophical claims were to be neatly separated. Yet such an argument cannot hold up, since Luther’s borderlines between theology and philosophy were not equally permeable in both directions. In Luther, philosophy cannot and should not challenge the fundamental claims of theology; on the other hand, theology could and should inform and correct philosophy (as Luther does relentlessly with respect to Aristotelian philosophy). In the very Lutheran milieu in which this debate took place, the theological importance of terms like “nature” and “beauty” would have been obvious. As Butt puts it: “it is not difficult to conjecture that a particular conception of God lies behind virtually every line by Birnbaum/Bach: God as the source of the language of music, God as the pattern of all perfection and God as the model of (misshapen) nature.

In other words, God is so immanent that he virtually no longer needs to be mentioned."

As we will see later in this chapter, the latter portion of this claim is not quite right; the former portion, however, is exactly right. Scheibe, Birnbaum, and Bach would have all taken for granted that the Lutheran God authorized the use of a term like "nature." They just held to fundamentally different interpretations of Lutheran aesthetics.

Bach was evidently unafraid to defend his interpretation of Lutheran aesthetics in at least one other context, a context that hardly seems any more theological than the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate: an employment dispute with his boss. Christoph Wolff summarizes the important events well:

It was the rector’s duty to strike a proper balance between the demands of music and those of other studies. Bach seems to have been satisfied with the balance achieved by Johann Heinrich Ernesti, who was rector during his first years in the school. His relations with Ernesti’s successor, Johann Matthias Gesner, were apparently even better: Gesner was a warm admirer of Bach’s musicianship, as we see from his description of Bach as organist and conductor contained in a note to an edition of Quintilian. But things took a sharp turn for the worse when Gesner was succeeded by Johann August Ernesti. A long series of documents marks the struggle between Bach and Ernesti. However the reader may adjudicate the controversy, and whoever was originally at fault, it is clear that Ernesti ended by weighting the scales as heavily as he could against music. The documents reveal the tenacity with which Bach fought to defend the rights of his position and the place of music in general in the life of the school.

As special as Bach’s liking for church work was, he had no special liking for many of his fellow church workers like Johann August Ernesti (1707-1781), the pioneering biblical

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421 Ibid.
422 NBR, 6.
423 Consider Bach’s choice of this text in BWV 179, in which Bach’s contemporary church is harshly criticized:
   "Das heutge Christentum
   Ist leider schlecht bestellt:"
scholar whom Bach must have believed was a weak interpreter of Lutheran theology. Such is the implicit claim of Paul Minear’s essay “J.S. Bach and J.A. Ernesti: A Case Study in Exegetical and Theological Conflict,” which addresses the deeper theological currents running below the surface of this otherwise garden-variety administrative quarrel. “When we uncover the source of enmity between rector and cantor,” he writes, “it may appear at first that the struggle arose out of nothing more than personal allergies and professional jealousies—factors not unknown in other faculties. In this case, however, that is hardly an adequate explanation.”424 The stakes were much higher, as he explains:

Two epochs, two cultures, two philosophies of education were at stake. Should secondary education continue to be grounded in Christian theology? If so, should music be given a central place in such training in theology? Also at issue were two differing approaches to the Bible, both of which have since demonstrated their efficacy… Bach was a devout, zealous Lutheran who continued the spirit, ethos, and biblical understandings of the seventeenth century. Ernesti was a child of eighteenth-century rationalism, with its antipathy toward aesthetic, allegorical, and analogical interpretations of the Bible.425

Bach could not endorse any “antipathy toward aesthetic, allegorical, and analogical

Die meisten Christen in der Welt
Sind laulichte Laodicäer
Und aufgeblasne Pharisäer”.
The stories of spats between Bach and his ecclesial co-workers and superiors are legion, though they have been wrongly conflated with his attitude toward Christianity and the church in general. See, for example, Blume, “Outlines of a New Picture of Bach.”
425 Minear, 135.
interpretations of the Bible,” for those were the very forms of theology he believed Luther had endorsed and the forms he had devoted his life to promoting. Although Bach’s music overwhelms its listeners with a surplus of creative intelligence, he often directed that creative intelligence toward the mockery of reason. Let us take a sampling: Bach chose texts that refer to reason as “deluded” (verblendete Vernunft” in BWV 175) and “foolish” (törichte Vernunft” in BWV 2), and even tells “frenzied reason” to be quiet (Schweig nur, taumelnde Vernunft” in BWV 178). Bach, in good Lutheran fashion, wanted to use reason to promote the beauty of his faith, but never wanted to let reason use him, as can happen to human beings in the state of fallen nature.

For Bach, Ernesti’s form of Lutheran theology was dangerously close to being unfaithful to Luther. To be sure, Bach would have likely known from his own study that Luther often praised historical-grammatical exegesis and excoriated allegorical exegesis, so he would have probably not denied that Ernesti’s project had some legitimization in Luther’s thought. Moreover, Bach may have found elements of Ernesti’s work valuable, such as his close attention to the meaning of specific biblical words. Bach himself was obviously interested in putting specific words into fitting musical forms. Nevertheless, Luther also excoriated the pretenses of reason, did not reject all forms of allegorical exegesis, and certainly did not reject musical and visual exegesis wholesale.426 On this basis, Bach would have been gravely concerned about the hyper-rationalist, anti-aesthetic, and anti-musical tendencies of Ernesti’s work. The dispute about Bach’s prefect was only the spark that set off this powder keg of theological resentment.

The version of Luther and Lutheranism that must have greatly appealed to Bach was the musical-aesthetic one, and Bach must have considered it his vocational duty to actualize as many latent musical potencies in that tradition as possible. “The ability corollary to that of differentiation,” Wolff writes, “was that of bringing any potentiality to its fullest possible realization.”427 Indeed, Bach confounds the typical modern assumption that “tradition” and “innovation” are caught up in a binary zero-sum game, wherein innovation can only occur by breaking the shackles of past tradition. Bachian innovation, however, arose out of careful study and appreciation for his Lutheran musical tradition, as Wolff explains in more detail:

What is true of the monumental proportions, the contrapuntal intensity, the rhythmic consistency of Bach’s works is just as true of the cogency of his themes, the expressiveness of his melodies, the force and richness of his harmony, the diversity and logic of his orchestration. In all of them he brought seed well germinated by his predecessors to fruition on a scale undreamed of before him. And thus without any break with the past—in fact, as the great conservator of its legacies—Bach took what had been handed down to him and treated it with a boldness that often seemed almost revolutionary.428

It is especially the “force and richness” of Bach’s harmony that I have been focusing on throughout this essay, in large part because Bach’s use of dissonance is both historically unprecedented and theologically conditioned. These twin factors – theological rationale and innovative uses of dissonance – suggest that using music to “drive the devil out of the human soul” was one of Bach’s driving concerns. After all, Bach wrote the overwhelming majority of his most dissonant work after losing both of his parents, his

427 For specific musical examples of such, see NBR, 13-14.
428 The editors list the cantata, unaccompanied sonatas and partitas for violin and violoncello, and the role of the harpsichord in ensemble music as specific examples, NBR 14-16.
first wife, and many of his children. From an early age, he felt the devil’s painful sting in his own soul, and apparently no existing music was dissonant enough to drive those feelings out completely. So he wrote his own.

4.4.1) Bachian Aesthetics in Historical Perspective

Bach lived and worked during the transition from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, and accordingly, his work bears on our understanding of both its “pre” and “post” history. Most of the work already presented deals with the “pre” side of Bach – specifically, the influence of Lutheran aesthetics on his work. Now, we pivot to consider Bach’s aesthetic work in its own immediate historical context and its reception in later historical eras. In particular, I will show that Bach’s education in Lutheran theological aesthetics helped him understand “nature” in a more robust, integrated way than other contemporary figures. Then, I will pivot to show that modern Bach scholarship has often ignored the explanatory power of Lutheran theology.

4.4.2) Melody, Harmony and the ‘Naturalness’ of Music

While Bach was quietly cultivating his contrapuntal craft in Germany, a fierce debate was brewing over in France. In the 1750s and 1760s, shortly after Bach’s death, Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) publicly and vehemently argued over the ‘naturalness’ of music. On the one hand, Rameau grounded music’s naturalness in the harmony of a *corps sonore*, a “sounding body.” Jeremy Begbie
describes the basic aspects of Rameau’s theory well:

As far as music is concerned, in his mature work Rameau locates this [natural] principle in the ‘sounding body’ (corps sonore), in the harmony produced by the vibrations of a string, a column of air, or a vocal cord. The corps sonore generates not only a principal resonance but a series of overtones, and from the resulting proportions and ratios of these multiple vibrations, Rameau seeks to demonstrate the harmonic syntax of the music of his time, and thereby the secrets of its affective energy. Among other things he sought to show that the consonant triad, deriving directly from the harmonic series, is basic to all consonances, that a dissonant seventh chord is basic to all dissonances, and that most chord progressions are reducible to a dissonant seventh chord resolving on to a consonant triad. He also held that the movement from one chord to another is to be understood in terms of the succession of chord roots (the ‘fundamental bass’ (basse fondamentale)).

This approach bears a striking resemblance to the Pythagorean tradition, wherein consonant harmonic ratios are proof of music’s embeddedness in natural, physical order. We should note, too, that although Bach left us with very few remarks on the subject of harmony, those we do have suggest the critical importance of the ‘fundamental bass’ to his own work. Rousseau, on the other hand, grounded music’s naturalness in a different musical property: melody. For Rousseau, harmony is a mere add-on to the musical substance of melody. After all, for him, what grounds music in human nature and thus enables them to form empathetic connections with one another is not a succession of bland harmonic chords; only the melody of the human voice can do that. In a vocal melody, human beings can rise beyond their brute characteristics and chart a course toward civilized engagement. In sum, while it would be oversimplified to suggest that Rameau and Rousseau conceived of this debate in entirely ‘either/or’ terms, it would be

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430 Wolff, 308-309.
fair to say that the whole debate is framed in oppositional, perhaps even almost zero-sum, terms: when it comes to music’s naturalness, the more of harmony, the less of melody, and vice-versa.

As far as we know, Bach himself was unaware of the musical philosophy of Rameau, Rousseau, and the oppositional logic of their later debate. At home in Leipzig, however, Scheibe had already pulled him into similar territory. Scheibe’s chief complaint, which echoes the line Rousseau took against Rameau, was that Bach’s obsession with harmonizing all four voices “completely covers the melody throughout” his works.\(^\text{431}\) Scheibe admired the strenuous effort this undertaking would require, but since “all the voices must work with each other and be of equal difficulty, and none of them can be recognized as the principal voice,”\(^\text{432}\) they must “conflict with Nature.”\(^\text{433}\) Bach’s music should simply imitate nature, he argued, and adding all of these extra ‘artificial’ lines to his polyphonic composition only confuses the melody, thus precluding nature from shining through.

What Rameau, Rousseau and Scheibe all missed – and what Bach understood keenly – is that both harmony and melody are deeply grounded in nature and not necessarily opposed to each other, and that the most natural music integrates the two. For a chief characteristic of Bach’s particular brand of polyphony is the vertical, harmonic integration of horizontal, melodic lines. Each melodic line remains fully itself while also harmonizing with the variety of other lines, which always also remain themselves in that

\(^{431}\) Ibid.  
\(^{432}\) Ibid.  
\(^{433}\) Ibid.
same harmonic moment.\textsuperscript{434} In these terms, Bach would have likely viewed the Rameau-Rousseau debate as a false binary. After all, his theological education would have trained him to see \textit{both} the ‘harmony of the spheres’ in which sounding music’s harmony is grounded \textit{and} human melodic expression as natural. In Christ, \textit{“das Wort,”} all things hold together.\textsuperscript{435} Indeed, not only do all things hold together in the Word, but the genuinely new, integrated knowledge Bach produces at the intersection of music/language and melody/harmony suggests that the meaning of \textit{“das Wort”} is potentially inexhaustible. Moreover, if we recall that in Bach’s theological education, art could play a role in the perfecting of nature, we see how Scheibe seems to have understood the notion of “artistic excess” the wrong way around. Bach’s music does not obfuscate nature with an ‘excess of art’; it is better viewed as using scientific investigation and artistic perception\textsuperscript{436} to \textit{penetrate} nature in order to reveal the deep interconnections within nature and the inexhaustible excess of meaning at those connections. Art, with the aid of musical science, can reveal nature to be pregnant with divine possibility. This is how art can perfect nature, as Johann Abraham Birnbaum hints at in his response to Scheibe.

\textsuperscript{434} In purely musical terms, this is part of why Hart sees Bach’s music as so deeply Trinitarian: unity and diversity are shown to be intrinsic to one another. See: Hart, \textit{The Beauty of the Infinite}, 282-285.
\textsuperscript{435} Colossians 1:17, NRSV, “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”
\textsuperscript{436} Exploring the connection between science and art in Bach’s music would require an essay in itself, but for now it is worth noting that in Bach’s obituary, his son C.P.E. Bach and his student Johann Friedrich Agricola, celebrated his ability to combine “the most hidden secrets of harmony with the most skilled artistry.” It would seem, then, that Bach used science to discover those ‘hidden harmonic secrets’ and art to employ them skillfully in musical form. \textit{NBR}, 298.
4.4.3) Modern Bach-Luther Studies in Light of This Study

In his essay “Music and Lutheranism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, Robin Leaver asks a critical question that I hope this study has answered: “But was Bach a Lutheran by conviction or convenience?” He then takes his reader through a condensed history of Bach-Luther reception, charting a course from overstated Bach hagiography of the nineteenth-century to the mid-twentieth-century skepticism of Blume and others to a tamer version of ‘Bach the Lutheran’ promoted after the discovery of his *Calov Bible*. My own account here, then, could be considered an intensification of this latest phase. If my claims are accurate and well founded, then Bach was not only a Lutheran by conviction; he was a Lutheran by robust conviction. If the discovery of the *Calov Bible* showed that Bach read his Bible carefully, then this dissertation shows that he also likely read large swaths (at the very least) of his own personal theological library carefully, and especially the work of Luther himself.

Accordingly, the conclusions of this dissertation fit in neatly with what I would call “orthodox Bach-Luther studies,” wherein Bach is presented as a devoted interpreter and practitioner of Lutheran theology. Leaver, Wolff, and Chafe (among others) would be active scholarly representatives of such ‘orthodox’ interpretation, and this dissertation should be considered a deepening, expanding, and nuancing of their general and established approach: using Lutheran theology as the primary explanatory factor for understanding Bach’s music. As a result, therefore, this dissertation challenges some of the key claims made by at least four other active scholars of Bach-Luther studies: Richard Taruskin, John Butt, Rebecca Lloyd, and Laurence Dreyfus. Let us take each in turn.
a) Richard Taruskin

In his essay “Facing up, Finally, To Bach’s Dark Vision,” Richard Taruskin presents a reading of the Bach-Luther connection that is wholly at-odds with the findings of the present study. He writes that Bach’s music is “a medium of truth, not beauty. And the truth he served was bitter. His works persuade us - no, reveal to us - that the world is filth and horror, that humans are helpless, that life is pain, that reason is a snare.” And Taruskin does not hesitate to tell us where Bach got these ideas from: “his concept of music derived from and inevitably contained The Word, and the word was Luther’s.” He at least has the right instinct by trying to explain Bach’s music by using Luther’s theology.

Taruskin’s basic argument runs as follows: the Bach most people know, the BWV-147-at-weddings Bach or Cello-Suites-in-advertisement-backgrounds Bach, the popular Bach that sometimes sounds rather galant, is not the essential Bach. “How utterly irrelevant this whole esthetic is to the Bach of the cantatas!” Taruskin exclaims. The essential Bach is elsewhere, and now that we have Bach’s entire cantata oeuvre recorded, we can hear Bach’s essential qualities: wrenching dissonances, animated expressions of

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437 Taruskin, “Facing up, Finally, to Bach’s Dark Vision,” 310. One might ask Taruskin why, if Bach thought that “the world is filth and horror,” he was so evidently interested in procreation. It seems unconscionably cruel to bring twenty children into a world one deems filthy and horrible, and Taruskin owes his reader an explanation for this implicit accusation of cruelty.
438 Ibid.
439 Ibid.
disgust with the world, and compositional assaults on would-be performers.\textsuperscript{440} “Anyone exposed to Bach’s full range (as now, thanks to [Harnoncourt’s] records, one can be) knows that the hearty, genial, lyrical Bach of the concert hall is not the essential Bach,” Taruskin claims. “The essential Bach was an avatar of a pre-Enlightened -- and when push came to shove, a violently anti-Enlightened -- temper.”\textsuperscript{441}

Taruskin is surely onto something here. Indeed, Taruskin’s essay deserves commendation in a few respects: he rightly argues that the popular Bach is not the essential Bach, that the essential Bach must include the rich and painful dissonances that permeate his work, and that Luther’s theology of sin and evil best explains that dissonant musical language. For a professional academic musicologist dealing in theological matters, many of his instincts are correct.

Unfortunately, however, the vices of Taruskin’s account far outweigh its virtues. First, the claim that Bach’s music was “a medium of truth, not beauty” cannot make any sense of Bach’s own aesthetic self-presentation, whether in theoretical or practical form. Nowhere in Taruskin’s essay does he deal with either the aesthetic language of the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate or the aesthetic texts Bach set to his own vocal music. Therefore, his claim that Bach’s music was ‘not a medium of beauty’ cannot hold up. Moreover, Taruskin never explains why we should pit “truth” and “beauty” against each other in such a binary way. Bach never did that himself, and Luther actually did quite the opposite. Throughout his writings, as we saw in the previous two chapters, Luther

\textsuperscript{440} “If you want to witness a real assault by composer on performer, try the middle section of the bass aria in Cantata No. 104.” Ibid., 316.\textsuperscript{441} Ibid., 310.
repeatedly referred to Jesus Christ (the main subject of Bach’s vocal music) as both “Truth” and “Beauty.”

Moreover, on the existential level, Taruskin’s essay can hardly account for Bach’s obvious joie de vivre. Even the most cursory of biographical explorations reveals Bach to have been a lover of sensual pleasure. Various biographical anecdotes related to his consumption of food and drink suggest that he was, in good Lutheran fashion, no stranger to the pleasures of the table.442 We know that he was a gracious host who often treated his guests to after-dinner music, and that he produced almost two-dozen children from his two marriages. Bach was obliged to be industrious, as he put it, but we must also imagine him retiring from a long day’s work into evenings of raucous conviviality, musical play, and nuptial pleasure. Bach did not believe that the world is filth and horror and therefore dread life; quite the opposite. Bach worked extremely hard and played extremely hard because he loved the life Christ had died for, and his music bears all the marks of that personality. If Taruskin rightly heard the contrast between the popular ‘hearty, genial, lyrical’ version of Bach and the neglected ‘painfully dissonant’ version of Bach, he did not hear that pleasant consonance almost always overwhelms the painful dissonances.

Take, for example, the opening chorus of BWV 66, in which Bach envelops a dissonant B-section with two A-sections of celebratory consonance. Because Christ drives the devil out of the soul (Ihr könnt verjagen), as Luther claimed, the B-section’s “sadness, fear, and anxious despair” (Das Trauren, das Fürchten, das ängstliche Zagen) should fade away (entweichet). The chorus rightly begins and ends with consonant

442 Bach’s love of the pleasures of the table are evidenced by various sources: his celebration of coffee in BWV 211, of smoking tobacco in BWV 515a, and his hefty purchases of beer, brandy, and tobacco, on at least one occasion. NBR, 65.
jubilation. Bach achieves a very similar celebratory effect with the “Lass uns jauchzen” chorus in BWV 16, but citing all of the relevant examples would simply stretch the bounds of this dissertation.

The next and more urgent question for Taruskin is this: if Bach thought that the world is only ‘horror and filth,’ why did he not commit suicide? A cantata like BWV 82, with its melismatic exultation at the thought of death, makes it abundantly clear that Bach rejoiced at the thought of dying. Similar examples abound throughout the cantatas. So why did Bach never do it? Why did he never turn his trusty rapier on himself?

The obvious answer is that Bach did not rejoice at the thought of death because he hated life, or because he thought that life is simply horror and filth. He rejoiced at the thought of death because it meant being united with the one he passionately longed to embrace: Jesus Christ. It therefore would have also potentially meant, at some point in the future, reunification with the loved ones he had lost throughout his life, from his parents to his first wife to his many deceased children. Such is Luther’s theology of the resurrection, which a student of Lutheran theology like Bach would have taken for granted.

And thus we arrive at the fundamental problem with Taruskin’s characterization of the Bach-Luther connection: he caricatures Luther and therefore cannot understand Bach fully. Taruskin’s Luther is a Hollywood stick figure who is trapped in his monastic cell crying out for divine mercy in this hellish, sinful world. Something like that did happen to Luther as a young man, but the mature Luther emerged from that trauma, extraordinarily grateful for the gift of creation and Christ’s sacrifice to redeem it. The mature Luther no longer wrestled interminably with his own sins; the mature Luther
continued to reject sin but focused much more on celebrating Christ’s cosmic victory over all sin.

The idea of “cosmic victory” is critical here, because Taruskin uses the idea of “the world” multiple times in his analysis. For Luther and the medieval exegetical tradition in general, however, the idea of “the world” is multivalent. It can mean, on the one hand, the forces that resist God’s purposes, which is highly typical of the gospel of Mark, for example. But it can also mean the entirety of God’s creation, as in “the entire world God created.” Luther, like all pre-modern theologians, uses it in this way many times.

In his essay, however, Taruskin introduces the concept of “the world” as if it were a univalent notion in Lutheran theology. In order for his account to make sense, “the world” must only be the “filth and horror” with which the author of Mark’s gospel routinely associates it (against the purity of Christ). In Taruskin’s scheme, “the world” does not mean “the goodness of God’s creation” or “the order implanted by a divine creator,” much less the highly nuanced “already but not yet” Lutheran interpretation, wherein “the world” functions as an analogical concept. In Lutheran theology, “the world” can mean both a) the current captivity of creation to the presence of sin and evil in it and b) the general ontological status of that creation, whether considered in its fallen or redeemed state. Luther weaves in and out of these meanings, just as his followers do, as we can see in one of the cantatas Taruskin analyzes.443

443 For further discussion about Luther’s conception of “the world” in its Edenic and post-lapsarian states, see 2.2.3-2.2.5.
Taruskin claims that one of Bach’s most consonant arias, the fifth movement of BWV 104, is “a real assault by composer on performer.” He focuses on the technical difficulties of the B-section, which are considerable, to build his case that Bach longed for death because he found life so disgusting:

The text reads, “Here you taste of Jesus’ goodness and look forward, as your reward for faith, to the sweet sleep of death.” The vocal line extends for 18 measures in a stately 12/8 meter without a single rest, and with notes lasting as much as nine beats. It reduces the estimable Philippe Huttenlocher to a gasping, panting state in which, were the aria to continue another two minutes, he would surely receive his reward.

Yet in his own (or chosen) translation, he omits a critical German word: “schon.” Typically rendered as “ever” or “already,” it dramatically alters the theological meaning of this text. The text cited above should read: “Here you already taste of Jesus’ goodness.” Indeed, the claim that we “already” taste Jesus’ goodness undercuts Taruskin’s entire argument. It shows that Bach did believe that we could experience a foretaste of the beauty of Christ’s redemption here and now. He even wrote the A-section with such a lush, comforting, consonant language that one might want to ask Taruskin another fundamental question: if Bach found this life so disgusting, why did he labor so much to make the music of this life interesting (at the bare minimum) to listeners and performers? Or, to put the question another way, if Bach’s dissonance and difficulty is simply an expression of disgust with life, why have so many performers labored so

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444 Taruskin, 318.
445 Ibid.
446 Importantly, “schon” is not the same as one of the most important words in this study: schön. The former means “ever/already,” the latter means “beautiful.”
strenuously to perform it? Why does it have such an ability to seduce suffering from willing performers?

Part of the answer is that Taruskin’s account puts too much weight on the relationship between specific musical recordings and compositional intentions. Just as he does with BWV 179, Taruskin claims that Bach wrote technical difficulty into his music in order to highlight human frailty. Complaining about the technical demands Bach makes on performers is nothing new, of course, and even forms part of Scheibe’s original critique. But Taruskin claims that his basic thesis would hold even if the performative qualities were higher: “Perform this aria [“Liebster Gott, erbarme dich” from BWV 179] with a hale and hearty mezzo-soprano full of strong musical views,” he writes, “accompany her with a pair of brand-new English horns spiffily played, and only “the music itself” will gain, not the aria, which utterly depends on its performers’ failings, and on the imperfections of their equipment, to make its harrowing point.” Now, nearly three decades after Taruskin’s writing, excellent recordings of this aria (and all of Bach’s arias) have proliferated. There are even such high quality performances that “failings”

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447 As Taruskin puts it: “Take the aria “Liebster Gott, erbarme dich” (Dear God, have mercy), for soprano solo and two accompanying oboes da caccia. The solo part is quite beyond the powers of the poor boy who is called upon to sing it, and who (in the witty words of the Bach scholar John Butt) has “no strong views about rhythm or tempo.”

Although the aria is in the key of A minor, the middle section modulates to, and ends in, the key of C minor. Not only is this jarring juxtaposition intensely expressive, it also puts the music in a harmonic region where the instruments simply cannot play in tune, especially as Bach takes them down to their very lowest, least tractable range. At the middle cadence the boy, too, is asked to sing lower than his tonal support permits.

The whole performance sounds loathsome and disgraceful. And these are the words: “My sins sicken me like pus in my bones; help me, Jesus, Lamb of God, for I am sinking in deepest slime.” Taruskin, 318.

448 Ibid., 319.
and “imperfections of their equipment” are not readily detectable at all. When one listens to those recordings, the “point” of Bach’s aria is not nearly so “harrowing.”

No one can deny that the tonal language of the aria is overwhelmingly dissonant – the opening theme uses repeated minor-second intervals to establish that Affekt from the start. The text is, after all, about the pain and suffering caused by human sin. Yet the vocal soloist enters on the text “Liebster Gott,” “Loving God,” and those very consonant lines contrast sharply with the various dissonances floating around it in the oboes and continuo. If the soloist cannot execute those lines with proper intonation, rhythmic accuracy, released production, and a smooth legato line (as the performer in question cannot), the tonal contrast can hardly be heard. Instead of hearing a soul crying out in consonance to a loving God in the midst of their sinful dissonances, we can only hear dissonance. And the importance of high quality performance for understanding Bach’s music should not surprise anyone familiar with Bach’s biography, given the various anecdotes associated with his demanding standards. Bach knew that the divine beauty of the gospel was at stake: if listeners could not hear the contrast between consonance and dissonance, then the full aesthetic profile of the aria would not be audible to them. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to hear Christ’s gracious redemption of the world, including human sin (the subject matter of the aria), in musical form.

b) John Butt

In his essay “Bach’s metaphysics of music” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, John Butt argues that “the purely theological viewpoint often illuminates the

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449 For example, Magdalena Kozena’s performance with John Eliot Gardiner and The English Baroque Soloists (Deutsche Grammophon 2000).
message of Bach’s music without giving any explanation of his conception of the
medium.”\textsuperscript{450} Butt wants to hone in on the specific character of Bach’s musical
metaphysics outside the realm of orthodox Lutheran theology, and “to contend that there
may indeed be contradictions between the historical religious context and, specifically,
the metaphysical basis of his creative work.”\textsuperscript{451} Butt attempts to explain Bach’s musical
metaphysics not by appealing primarily to Luther and the Lutheran theologians I have
been engaging here (what Butt calls “the historical religious context); he wishes to
explain Bach’s musical metaphysics by appealing to figures on the periphery of orthodox
Lutheranism, such as Leibniz (1646–1716), and entirely outside it, such as Spinoza
(1632–1677). As he puts it, “Bach’s compositional mind can be illuminated – if it cannot
directly be explained – by analogy with the metaphysics of rationalist philosophers of the
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.”\textsuperscript{452}

In order to defend this claim, Butt argues that the “immanent sacrality” Bach
associated with music itself “would have been unthinkable within Orthodox
Lutheranism.”\textsuperscript{453} He groups Lutheran orthodoxy in with “most of the monotheistic
religions,” wherein “God is essentially a figure transcending the imperfect earthly realm,
accessible only through specific avenues (e.g. Revelation and the discipline of \textit{faith}).”\textsuperscript{454}
According to Butt, music itself is not one of those avenues. He argues that in Lutheran
orthodoxy, “to affirm – unequivocally – an immanent sacrality in music is to be open to
the charge of pantheism, something which undercuts the distinction between God and this

\textsuperscript{450} Butt, “Bach’s Metaphysics of Music,” 46.
\textsuperscript{451} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{452} Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{453} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{454} Ibid., 46-47.
world, and something which could be seen to undermine the very transcendent basis of Christian morality.” For Butt, there is a great chasm between the way Bach treated music and the way music was supposed to be treated in early eighteenth-century orthodox Lutheranism. Accordingly, he asserts that the “God who was central to Bach’s life as an active and devout Lutheran is not always the same as the God of his compositional mind.” To put it simply, Butt wants his reader to believe that Bach’s sprawling and ambitious musical project forced him outside the bounds of orthodox Lutheran theology.

One of the most fundamental claims of this dissertation, which I hope to have proven by now, has been quite the opposite: that Bach’s identity as ‘an active and devout Lutheran’ is what shaped his ‘compositional mind’ most significantly. I have been arguing for a theological reading of Bach’s aesthetics, which means that the idea of “Bach’s musical metaphysics” has always been assumed throughout. “Musical metaphysics” examines that which is more than (meta) the physical world (physics), the qualities of music that cannot be reduced simply to physics (such as vibrations in the air). The conceptual territories of metaphysics and beauty therefore overlap significantly, and the conclusions of this aesthetic study suggest that Butt’s account does not adequately deal with Bach’s musical metaphysics. For any account of Bach’s music as an aesthetic or metaphysical reality must deal deeply with the conceptual framework that he inherited and evidently embraced: Lutheran Christology.

In the first place, Butt includes Lutheranism in his category of “most of the monotheistic religions,” an idea that is rather foreign to the thought of Luther. Luther was certainly interested in distinguishing his thought from the theological status quo of his

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455 Ibid., 47.
456 Ibid.
own medieval Christian context, but he was also adamant that his highly Christological brand of theology could not be reduced to any philosophical notion, which would certainly include the modern philosophical notion of there being “monotheistic religions” that a modern academic could evaluate on the same plane.

This methodological mistake yields mistaken conclusions. Consider, for example, Butt’s conclusion about the relationship between Bach’s music and the devil:

In short then, there is a tension between an appreciation of the intrinsic, God-given properties of music itself and the vital necessity that the music be put only to good use, always serving a suitable text. At the very least, one could infer that music could serve both God and the Devil with equal indifference.\textsuperscript{457}

In Lutheran theology, as we have seen, there is no such tension at all. Butt’s construal of Lutheran theology cannot be accurate because Luther claimed straightforwardly that music produces “innocent delight” and can even participate in Christ’s victory over the devil by driving him out of the human soul. The claim that “music could serve both God and the Devil with equal indifference” is therefore invalid. In Lutheran theology, music can only possibly serve the devil when it is not true music at all, perhaps when it is the purely dissonant or self-glorifying “devilish hubbub” Bach himself wrote about. At that point, it hardly even deserves the name of “music.” The status of developed music in orthodox Lutheranism is not really ambiguous or indifferent; developed music is an augmentation of the beauty already present in musical nature as a gift of God, and potentially a tool to drive the devil out of the human soul.

\textsuperscript{457} Ibid., 48.
Or consider the way Butt talks about the idea of “nature” in Bach. In his book *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity*, Butt claims that “although Bach’s basic standpoint is indeed archaic, his sense of ‘improving nature’ in fact represented a different aspect of modernity, one that owes its lineage to Renaissance Neo-Platonism.”\(^{458}\) Butt continues his argument by appealing to Roger de Piles, who argues a very similar line to Luther’s in his *Encomium Musices*.\(^{459}\) What Butt apparently fails to recognize is that the idea of ‘art correcting the flaws of nature’ is not just a modern idea; it comes from Luther himself. There is no need to appeal outside of Lutheranism to “a different aspect of modernity” in order to explain Bach’s music.

In a similar vein, Butt uses the connection between nature and beauty to attempt to shed light on Bach’s music. He quotes Marpurg’s preface to the 1752 edition to *The Art of Fugue*:

One would have to lack confidence in the insight of musical connoisseurs if one were to tell them that in this work are contained the most hidden beauties possible in the art of music… one could also draw the conclusion, taking into consideration everything that has ever come to pass in music past or present, that no one has surpassed him in thorough knowledge of the theory and practice of harmony, or I may say, in the deep and thoughtful execution of unusual, ingenious ideas, far removed from the ordinary run, and yet spontaneous and natural; I say natural, meaning those ideas which must, by their profundity, their connection, and their organization, meet with the acclaim of any taste, no matter of what country.\(^{460}\)

\(^{458}\) Butt, *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity*, 64.
\(^{459}\) This chapter, footnote 87.
\(^{460}\) Quoted in Butt, “Bach’s Metaphysics of Music,” 59.
Butt then comments that “here, again, we encounter the ‘natural’, this time in the sense of the universal and timeless.” Modern philosophy has attempted to appropriate terms like “universal” and “timeless,” but these terms only make sense of Bach’s music when understood in terms of his theology. The “universal” and “timeless” aspects of nature are not philosophical; they emerge from Luther’s doctrine of creation, wherein music (in whatever time or place) was created through the agency of Christ.

So as we read the closing of Butt’s account in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, where he attempts to set Bach’s musical metaphysics in historical context, we must keep the historical importance of Lutheran Christology in full view. Butt closes by appealing to a figure close to the heart of this study: “Christoph Wolff, in his excellent study of these issues, suggests that Bach can only incompletely be appreciated according to the aesthetic preconditions of his own day.” Butt then follows Wolff by proposing that “the aesthetic and critical apparatus of later ages helps us to appreciate the extent of Bach’s genius.” This is not entirely wrong, and we certainly can learn much about Bachian aesthetics from the work of later ages (as I have even tried to do at various points in this dissertation). But this construal does not account for Bach’s rather reactionary theological stance (what Butt calls “archaic), whereby the aesthetic thought of Luther becomes a standard against which Bach could evaluate any prevailing aesthetic thoughts of his own day. To put it bluntly, Bach thought that people like Ernesti and Scheibe were bad interpreters of Luther, and even if we can gain aesthetic insights from

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461 Ibid.
462 Ibid.
463 Ibid.
“later ages,” it should be clear that Bach was predominantly influenced by the “earlier ages” of orthodox Lutheran aesthetics.

c) Rebecca Lloyd

Rebecca Lloyd’s account of the Bach-Luther relationship hits a bit closer to the mark, but she herself can offer no satisfying solution to the question of Luther’s role in Bach studies. In her essay “Bach: Luther’s Musical Prophet?” Lloyd surveys scholarly approaches to the Bach-Luther connection and finds all of them wanting. She rightly acknowledges that most scholars “would agree that Luther provides a vital context for interpreting Bach’s sacred music,” and her goal is to reorient that discussion away from the influence of conservative scholars such as Karl Holl and the Steigers (Lothar and Renate). She spends much of her essay attempting to dismantle their claims, but fortunately she eventually shifts her attention to her own constructive account, which fits in neatly with the claims of this dissertation, as we will see.

Lloyd is concerned that “most theologically influenced Bach scholars have claimed historical readings of Luther, when in fact they rely on a view of him filtered through mid-twentieth-century German dogmatic theology.” According to her, the figures who have dominated theological Bach scholarship since the “Luther Renaissance” movement (Karl Holl, the Steigers, Eric Chafe, and Robin Leaver especially) have painted an anachronistic image of Luther he would not endorse: a musico-allegorical exegete with a fetish for the German language. This is too narrow a view of Luther, she

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465 Lloyd, 7.
asserts, as there are already accounts of Luther that are “Catholic, Protestant, Reformed, medieval, modern, ecclesiastical, existentialist, authoritarian, revolutionary, and everything in between.” According to her, Luther’s thought is far too diverse to fit into a single dogmatic paradigm. “Faced with the sheer volume, complexity, and frequent inaccessibility of Luther’s own writings,” she asserts, “Bach scholars have tended – entirely understandably – to rely on secondary literature when divining his message. Consequently, their view of Luther is filtered through the writings of later (mainly twentieth-century) theologians.” For Lloyd, the Luther of traditional theological Bach scholarship is a fiction.

Lloyd’s strongest criticism is of Lothar Steiger, whose argument she describes thus: “German Christians should not update Luther’s Bible into modern German. In his view, Luther’s words should not be changed, for they represent a unique Godly union of sense and beauty.” Yet “such ‘Biblicism,’ she counters, “such fetishizing of the German text, would have been alien to Luther.” Here Lloyd is surely right. In the first place, Steiger’s claim militates against the history of biblical canon formation, wherein scriptural translation has been normative ever since (at least) the Septuagint. To put it simply, Christianity has always been a religion that depends on scriptural translation, and it remains so today. But Steiger’s claim is weaker when applied to the particular work of Luther, who, it could be said, succeeded in wrangling a German Bible out of the hands of

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466 Ibid.
467 Ibid., 6.
468 Ibid., 10.
469 Ibid., 11.
470 The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Old Testament (and other writings) that predates the birth of Christ, and was foundational for the writing of the Greek New Testament.
a Latin-fetishizing Catholic church. It is not difficult at all to imagine Luther being horrified at the thought of his own translation being frozen in time forever.

Lloyd’s next target is Eric Chafe, whom she clearly considers an active (and non-German) proponent of this conservative theological tradition. According to her, Chafe took the “Luther as German exegete” work of Holl/Steiger and built upon it, seeking hidden exegetical continuities from the thought of Luther to the music of Bach. Lloyd accuses him of misconstruing the concept of “allegory” in Luther, which Chafe uses throughout his scholarly work to link Luther and Bach theologically. Luther often excoriated allegorical exegesis, she argues, and she has plenty of clear examples to offer in support. Chafe is therefore unwise, if not completely wrong, to put so much weight on allegory as a concept that can explain Bach’s use of Luther. Here Lloyd has a point: if even Chafe himself acknowledges Luther’s rejection of the quadriga, the fourfold sense, why does he work so hard to try to revive it? Why not just acknowledge that neither Bach nor Luther were that interested in “allegory” as a concept, and that we should explain the obvious connection between Bach’s tonality and Luther’s theology through other means? Lloyd answers that he is trapped in the idea of “musical exegesis,” that “he is content to echo the work of the conservative Luther Renaissance movement.”

Yet as correct as she may be about the pitfalls of Chafe’s approach, Lloyd is arguably trapped herself. She spends almost her entire essay lining Bach scholars up and

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471 For further discussion of Chafe’s work, see 3.3.3.
472 The quadriga is a mature form of medieval exegesis whereby scriptural text is interpreted according to four senses: the literal/historical, the allegorical, the moral/tropological, and the anagogical/eschatological.
473 Lloyd, 17.
knocking them down, but not within the context of a constructive approach (as I hope to have done here in my criticism of Lloyd and others). She uses the proliferation of studies presenting “Luther-as-X” or “Luther-as-Y” as an authority that could de-authorize the alleged hegemony of Holl and his followers, but nowhere does she explain why any of those studies should be considered legitimate. She attempts to reinforce this move by appealing to the allegedly confused Luther, who, in her words, “cared little for overall coherence.”

In order to knock Holl and his followers down, she presents a confused and incoherent Luther that later scholarship has taken in many different directions. To substantiate her claims, however, she uses only a handful of Luther’s texts as if they were representative of a coherent position. Does Lloyd think that one can use Luther coherently or not? What would be the methodological criteria for using Luther’s allegedly incoherent texts in a coherent manner? How many sections of quoted text count as “proof,” and why is her methodology somehow exempt from her own stated standards? Yes, Lloyd has pointed to texts that destabilize the position of Holl and his followers, but she has hardly out-explained them by proposing a more comprehensive version of Luther.

A clue to the source of the problems in Lloyd’s essay comes from her claim that “Bach scholars have tended—entirely understandably—to rely on secondary literature when divining [Luther’s] message.” There are, to be sure, limitations to any form of “interdisciplinary research” (to use the modern academic term that would likely disturb

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474 Lloyd, 6. Lloyd surely assumes too much when she claims that Luther “cared” little for overall coherence. One can care greatly about coherence even while failing to achieve that coherence. Such a phenomenon is particularly common with respect to extremely ambitious thinkers, such as Luther.

475 Ibid.
both Luther and Bach) and all interdisciplinary research (in the modern academy especially) should take into account the secondary literature of whatever disciplines are involved. Yet one might wonder why she considers this tendency “entirely” understandable, particularly given Bach’s own voracious interest in learning Lutheran theology. Is it really too much for theologians to expect musicologists to read large swaths of Luther’s theology for themselves, and then to make their own claims about it (in dialogue with secondary literature)? If we are trying to take into account the convictions of Bach and Luther themselves (which Lloyd certainly seems to want to do), then relying on secondary literature alone is a highly questionable methodology for doing so.

A related problem with Lloyd’s essay is that she calls the modern idea of exegesis “anachronistic.” Throughout the essay, she tries to downplay Luther’s interest in “exegesis,” especially in musical terms, and uses the historical distance between the modern term and Luther to justify it. But this is a bizarre move to make, especially because Luther himself was so interested in the interpretation of scripture. “Exegesis” and “hermeneutics” are modern terms, to be sure, but they were intended to describe precisely what Luther cared so much about: the interpretation of meaning in scripture. Should we abandon the term “aesthetics” simply because of its modern invention, in spite of the fact that Luther and Bach wrote so much about beauty? One would hope not.

Thankfully, toward the end of her essay, Lloyd softens her tone and acknowledges that an exegetical/hermeneutical approach to Bach should not be expunged entirely.\textsuperscript{476} Abusus

\textsuperscript{476} “Yet I do not want to advocate an end to hermeneutics in Bach studies,” Lloyd admits late in her essay (26). What she wants, apparently, is to disentangle the study of Bachian hermeneutics from the conservative theological agendas that gave rise to it. “It is surely
non tollit usum, and the mistakes of Holl and his followers do not destroy their project entirely. After all, anyone who understands fundamental Christian theology, the German language, and Bach’s vocal music can detect a powerful interpretive mind at work. The meaning Bach derives from scriptural text is not the same as a modern exegete like Ernesti (as we saw above), but in light of this study, Bach can appeal more strongly to Luther than any modern biblical exegete. And Lloyd seems unaware of this theological-aesthetic dimension in Bach.

Indeed, Lloyd’s lack of theological awareness becomes apparent in a telling sentence: “There is no evidence that Werckmeister—or Bach—expected music to interpret a text. Rather, they expected music to simply reflect the glories of creation.” There is considerable evidence, however, that a baroque Lutheran (such as Werckmeister or Bach) would expect music to interpret a text. There is also plenty of evidence that Bach expected music to reflect the glories of creation, as Lloyd rightly assumes. There is even more evidence, which I have marshaled throughout this dissertation, that a posited “either/or” between scriptural text and nature/creation dramatically misses the point of Lutheran Christology. Both Bach and Luther were primarily concerned with the glory of Christ, “The Word” through whom all things were created, and about whom all scriptural text testifies.

possible,” she writes, “for writers to become more aware of their scholarly ancestry, to heighten their critical faculties by understanding more about the agendas driving the various Luther images down the centuries, and to be more careful about historically situating both themselves and the authorities they cite, in an attempt to understand which images they want to retain and which to reject” (ibid).

477 Lloyd, 18-19.
478 For example, see 3.2.5, especially footnote 63. According to Luther, artistic music “helps materially” in understanding the spiritual meaning of the text.
Late in her essay, Lloyd gestures in a more promising direction. “My own contingent solution to the problem of Luther in Bach studies indeed returns inescapably to Luther himself,” she writes. “Not, however, to the stern Scriptural exegete anachronistically painted by later theologians, but to the ex-monk to whom the quotation about “wine, women, and song” found such an easy, if erroneous, attribution.”479 The aesthetic Luther, who delights in the beauty of Christ’s good gifts in creation, is indeed the Luther who explains Bach. Yet Luther also knew that he would know nothing of Christ without scripture, and that the personal concept of “the Word” encompasses more than just words alone.

d) Laurence Dreyfus

Unfortunately, Laurence Dreyfus makes a similar mistake to Lloyd in his otherwise excellent book *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*.480 After more than two hundred pages of painstaking musicological analysis, Dreyfus closes his account by zooming out from Bach’s music itself and situating it historically. According to him, we should neither “turn Bach into a Romantic,” nor “reduce him to a Leibniz or a seventeenth-century natural philosopher.”481 We should, instead, think of him as a Lutheran musical exegete:

For Bach, the impetus to interpret rather than merely to imitate or represent seems to have been modeled on the strong tradition of homiletic sermons in which theological hermeneutics, that is, the Lutheran theory of biblical interpretation, held a consistently honored place. Not only was a Christian supposed to gloss a sacred text with an interpretation so as to

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479 Ibid., 27.
480 Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*.
481 Dreyfus, 242.
reaffirm his belief, but, in the terms of Pietist hermeneutics, he was to search for an “Application” relevant to the position of the interpreter. This “circular” method, with all its “contrapuntal” vagaries and doubts, unclarity and turgidity, sounds remarkably closer to the likes of Bach than any amount of logical, progressive Enlightened thinking.\textsuperscript{482}

For Dreyfus, however, Lutheran exegesis does not explain Bach’s music \textit{tout court}. According to him, Bach was no passive recipient of this tradition; in fact, Dreyfus claims that he “revised” it:

Yet the tradition of theological hermeneutics cannot have been the sole inspiration of Bach’s thinking, for the simple reason that no one thought it in music’s power to interpret the world. Even Martin Luther, who stated that “after theology I accord to music the highest place and the greatest honor,” never intended that music should rise to equal prominence with the Word, much less be capable, on occasion, of challenging it. So despite the indispensable role that music would play in cementing religious faith—one may cite Luther’s great poem to Frau Musica—music was to remain a devoted servant of the text, an \textit{ancilla verbi}, a notion that survived intact from the days of Quintilian. That Bach should have permitted himself this revision of Lutheran theology cannot be chalked up to some conscious intellectual blasphemy but rather to the simple fact that for Bach thinking in music was a necessary consequence of a belief in its divine origins. Since his innovative powers of invention expanded rather than rejected music’s traditional forms of representation, Bach’s compositional stance was entirely consonant with theological orthodoxy, at the same time that no available theoretical language within theology or music could adequately come to terms with it.\textsuperscript{483}

This is a sophisticated argument, but one that does not take into account Luther’s theological aesthetics and the role that music plays within that overarching structure. In the first place, depending on what exactly we mean by “interpret,” it is probably inaccurate to say that “no one thought it in music’s power to interpret the world.” That seems to be precisely what the Platonic-Pythagorean tradition of music theory was trying

\textsuperscript{482} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{483} Ibid., 242-243.
to do – namely, to “interpret the world” by means of musical mathematics. And because Luther endorsed that tradition multiple times (as we saw in chapter three) and even used aesthetic language in praising it, we can see Bach here as a faithful adherent of Lutheran theology, not as a “reviser” of it.

Bach’s faithful adherence to Lutheran theology becomes even clearer when we consider a second concept Dreyfus introduces: “The Word.” He clearly refers to “the Word” here as “Scripture” or “the words of Scripture,” and accordingly (and understandably) demotes music to an inferior position. But Luther’s concept of “The Word” is much more expansive than this, as we saw throughout chapters two and three. For Luther, “The Word” is first and foremost the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. In a secondary sense, that concept can be applied to a) the words of Scripture that attest to the life and activity of “The Word,” b) the preaching of the church, and c) the creation of all things through “The Word,” Christ himself. It is this third sense that Dreyfus seems unaware of, since he explains Bach’s alleged “revision” by appealing to “to the simple fact that for Bach thinking in music was a necessary consequence of a belief in its divine origins.” That “simple fact” comes directly from Luther’s doctrine of creation through “The Word” (John 1 and Colossians 1 especially), in which music is considered one of the most beautiful gifts of God. Luther’s theological aesthetics (and

484 Dreyfus also claims here that in Luther’s theology, “music was to remain a devoted servant of the text.” There is certainly plenty of evidence to back this claim up, but there are also moments in Luther when “devoted servant” is not quite the right metaphor. For example, in the *Encomium Musices*, Luther claims that music has a language of its own, and in his treatise on the last words of David, he uses the language of cooperation to describe the wedding of “beautiful text and beautiful tune.” The “wedding of two beautiful spouses” (text and tune) is a more apt metaphor for Luther’s ideal song than “devoted servant,” though it is likely also true that in a situation of divorce (as in Luther’s 1542 preface to a burial hymn collection), the text takes priority.
especially its Christological component) is the ‘available theoretical language within theology’ to account for his ‘innovative powers of invention.’ The ‘consonance’ that Dreyfus perceives between Bach’s music and Lutheran orthodoxy is not accidental or even a conscious revision on Bach’s part; it is wholly to be expected from a figure who studied Lutheran theology as closely as he did.

4.5.1) Conclusion

The idea of “Lutheran aesthetics” may sound strange to modern ears, and especially to those accustomed to listening to the work of Catholic and Lutheran theologians who have cast Luther as an anti-aesthetic figure. Yet it should be clear by now that one of the most important musicians and theologians ever to have lived was well aware of, and decided to become a devoted interpreter of, this highly Christological aesthetic strain in Luther’s thought. Luther and many of his followers trained Bach to believe that true beauty is defined by Christ’s cosmic redemption, and that music can participate in that redemption by making the victory of consonance over dissonance audible. The contours of that theological-historical interpretation look something like the following.

In God’s original creation, everything was beautiful and perfect. Adam’s limbs were perfectly proportional and the music of Eden was perfectly consonant. Through the original sin of Adam and Eve, creation fell into disorder and became misshapen. The bodies of human beings became disfigured and musical nature became disproportional, became dissonant. God chose a community of people called Israel and promised them a
Messiah who would save the world from its fallen state. That Messiah became incarnate in the form of Jesus Christ, and through his cross and resurrection, he shone beautiful light into the dark, dissonant places of nature (both human and non-human). The musical artist can thus participate in that redemption by making works of musical art in which the dark dissonances of nature are overcome by the bright light of consonance. The hearing of Christ’s consonant victory over dissonance drives the devil out of the human soul, which is precisely what Luther seemed to think was so beautiful about music. And it seems that Bach was extraordinarily interested in driving the devil out of the human soul, because no one before (and no one since), has been able to introduce as much dissonance, and then to resolve it as skillfully. In Bach, we hear the “ungestalt” of musical nature, but we also hear fallen musical nature being transformed into the “schönerer Gestalt” of heaven, the more beautiful heavenly form that Nicolai describes in such vivid detail in *Theoria vitae aeternae*. And Bach’s polyphonic expansions of Nicolai’s hymns enable all of us to hear that more beautiful form better than either Luther or Nicolai could have.

The end of this chapter is also the end of the argumentative loop I opened up in chapter one, where I first claimed that Bach was a sophisticated interpreter of Lutheran aesthetics who used music to make the beauty of Christ’s cosmic redemption more audible to his listeners. In the next chapter, therefore, I pivot from defending that claim to proposing some implications of my findings for the contemporary academy and church. As important as Bach and Luther were in the history of Christianity, hundreds of years (and in many cases vast geographical distances) still separate us from their work. The final chapter of this dissertation attempts to connect that work – and the arguments I have
made about it – to contemporary theological and musicological issues that affect the church and academy both.
Chapter 5: The Beauty of Bach in the Contemporary Academy and Church

“How little it takes to make us happy! The sound of a bagpipe—Without music life would be an error. The German even imagines God as singing songs.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche

“Despite considerable research into this subject over the past two or three decades, it is not at all well known to Bach scholars, and most definitely not to the general reader or Bach lover.”

- Eric Chafe, on Bach’s theological library

“Man, I feel like there needs to be more songs for people who are really going through the hardest time in life. They’re struggling and maybe have just buried someone and they’re looking over a grave. And that sense of loss, that hurt of loss of losing someone. But what kind of words can you give people in that moment in worship, to worship God in the midst of it?”

- Chris Tomlin

“Bach is the greatest of Christian theologians, the most inspired witness to the ordo amoris in the fabric of being.”

- David Bentley Hart

5.1.1) Introduction

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486 Chafe, J.S. Bach’s Johannine Theology, 19.
“To include Johann Sebastian Bach in a history of the Lutheran theology of music is to risk succumbing to the same confusion which has given rise to the Bach legend,” Joyce Irwin claims in the final chapter of her study of music’s place within baroque Lutheranism.\(^{489}\) “However well informed Bach was in matters of theology,” she continues, “he never took up the pen to argue a theological point or to support his music with theology. He was not a trained theologian.”\(^{490}\) In the broadest sense of the word “theologian,” whereby one simply uses reason (logos) with reference to God (theos), Irwin’s claim seems untenable. For example, Bach certainly had to reason about God in order to use dissonance in such a theologically sophisticated way (examples of which we examined in detail in chapters one and four), and he did write about the intersection of theology and music in a number of places (as we also saw, especially in chapter one).\(^{491}\)

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\(^{489}\) The “Bach legend” Irwin refers to here is the image of Bach as a pious conservative Lutheran intent on proselytizing Lutheranism and protecting the Lutheran church from outside influence. The legend originates primarily in the work of Philipp Spitta (1841-1894), whose Bach biography expanded on that of Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1749-1818), Bach’s first true biographer and a friend of the Bach family. George B. Stauffer describes the difference in the two biographies and the lasting impact of this “Bach legend”: “Philipp Spitta, writing in the midst of the Protestant church-music revival of the 1870’s, presented a different image. In his monumental “Johann Sebastian Bach,” he drew a vivid portrait of the St. Thomas cantor as the Fifth Evangelist, proselytizing for the Lutheran faith through his church cantatas and Passions. Spitta’s view held sway until the 1950’s, when a redating of the church cantatas revealed that Bach had written most of his sacred works during the first six years of his Leipzig tenure and then, for the next 21 years, turned to different endeavors. To Friedrich Blume and others writing in the “God is dead” era of the 1960’s, this could mean just one thing: Bach was a secular composer who moved away from the church to compose the harpsichord concertos, the “Goldberg” Variations and other worldly masterpieces.” George B. Stauffer, “Beyond Bach the Monument, Who Was Bach the Man?” The New York Times (April 2, 2000).

\(^{490}\) Irwin, *Neither Voice nor Heart Alone*, 141.

\(^{491}\) See 1.1.3.
But Irwin seems to have a more specific sense of the word in mind: the modern “professional theologian,” who has formal and extended theological training in an institution of higher learning. According to her, Bach is clearly not that academic sort of “theologian,” and one can hardly disagree.\footnote{Robin Leaver offers a convincing description of “Bach as Musical Theologian and Theological Musician,” arguing that while Bach was not a professional academic theologian, his work integrates theology and music so well that both titles are fitting. See: Leaver, \textit{Luther’s Liturgical Music}, 289.} In twenty-first century terms, Bach never even went to college, much less graduate school. He apparently did not even consider himself the sort of non-professional theologian who might write his own theological works without subjecting them to academic scrutiny. So by calling Bach “the greatest of Christian theologians,” presumably to be ranked alongside obvious “professional theologians” such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, or Barth, has David Bentley Hart committed a category mistake? Or could Bach be a different sort of theologian, one whose work blurs modern academic boundaries between theology and musicology? And if so, what are we to make of this bizarre situation, in which a non-academic musical theologian (or theological musician) has ascended to astonishing heights in a musicological academy that typically cares little for theology?

Throughout this dissertation, I have been arguing, and hopefully demonstrating, that Bach was a sophisticated interpreter of Lutheran aesthetics who used music to make the beauty of Christ’s cosmic redemption more audible to his listeners. In this chapter, I take the findings from the first four chapters and situate them within the contexts of the contemporary academy and church, two contexts that are extremely relevant to Bach’s music and the setting of this dissertation. My goal in doing so is not merely to broaden the scope of the first four chapters, but to argue that, given the findings of the first four
chapters, neither the contemporary academy nor the contemporary church provides an entirely hospitable locale for Bach studies (and his understanding of beauty).

Bach is relevant to the contemporary academy because contemporary academic musicologists universally respect his work, and tend to regard him as the most important musical figure in the transition from the medieval to the modern world, the figure who subsumed the achievements of early music and then planted the seeds for musical modernity to flourish. Tales of Bach profoundly influencing later composers of various eras of “classical music” (such as Mozart, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, Brahms, Webern, and Schoenberg) and “post-classical” musicians (such as Oscar Peterson, The Beatles, and The Beach Boys) are legion, and enhance Bach’s credibility as one of the founts from which modern music has sprung. Bach is also relevant to the contemporary church because he spent the overwhelming majority of his career serving churches, even though he was certainly aware of more lucrative musical opportunities outside the church. Without question, Bach is one of the most influential church musicians ever to live, and his music remains an ecclesial treasure trove hundreds of years after his death.

Bach’s situation in the contemporary academy and contemporary church remains, however, a vexing issue. On the one hand, the overwhelming majority of academic studies of Bach have been written by musicologists with minimal theological training, or by theologians with minimal musicological training. Accordingly, the academic field of Bach musicology is riddled with theological errors (a sampling of which we observed in the last chapter), and “most theological study of Bach has focused mainly on the librettos of the vocal works, not so much on the notes or how the words and notes together
generate religious meanings.” The scholarly work of Eric Chafe would be a notable exception to such a sweeping claim, but the current paucity of musicologically informed studies of Bachian theology is striking. It strongly suggests, among other things, that modern academic theologians have rarely – if ever – approached music with the theological seriousness it deserves. Consider, for example, the fact that Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) never engaged Bach’s music substantively, despite being an incredibly important professional theologian and accomplished amateur musician. Or consider that Étienne Gilson (1884-1978), another twentieth-century Catholic theologian of major academic stature, has called Bach’s masses “liturgical monstrosities” without offering any clear musicological criteria for determining when liturgical music becomes monstrous. When it comes to the scholarly neglect of Bach’s fusion of theology and music, then, both academic theology and academic musicology must bear some blame.

The modern western church, however, has not exactly championed Bach’s music with a unified voice. On the one hand, Bach’s music survives in the liturgies of Lutheran churches; his hymn-harmonizations pervade the United Methodist Hymnal, and

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493 Marissen and Melamed, eds. Introduction to Bach Studies, 151.
494 See, for example: Chafe, Bach’s Johannine Theology, Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J.S. Bach (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), and Tears Into Wine.
495 Etienne Gilson, The Arts of the Beautiful (New York: Dalkey Archive, 2000), 175. Gilson makes a strong distinction between the simple purity of Gregorian chant and the complex aesthetics of composers such as Mozart, Haydn, Bach, and Beethoven, situating Palestrina’s early polyphony as a sort of middle-ground compromise between the two. However, he never identifies the point at which polyphony becomes purely artistic and aesthetic (and apparently therefore not “sacred). Beyond that ambiguity, Gilson never explains why he groups the masses of Bach and Beethoven together as “liturgically monstrous.” Is it the length? The instrumentation? The dynamic interaction of word and tone? The reader is left to wonder how he has arrived at such sweeping and definitive judgments.
496 The most recent United Methodist Hymnal (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989) includes thirteen hymns that credit Bach.
churches remain fitting venues for performances of his works. However, in some corners of the church, Bach’s music has either been rejected or simply ignored. In recent decades, “Contemporary Christian Music” (or “CCM”), has arisen as an alternative to “traditional church music,” and it has certainly grown since its inception. Since “CCM” began, many churches have struggled to navigate between the categories of “contemporary” and “traditional” music, typically opting for one, the other, some blend of the two, or two distinct worship services within one local church. Accordingly, the term “worship wars” has entered ecclesial parlance, and Bach tends to be marshaled in defense of the traditional warriors.

It seems, however, that the era of the “worship wars” is drawing to a close, and some sort of musical stalemate has been achieved. A 2019 survey conducted by Lifeway Research of 1,000 Protestant pastors in the USA, for example, reports that only 15% of Protestant pastors in the USA consider navigating musical preference to be the biggest challenge of their ministry. The specifics of the study are illuminating. When asked, “which are regular parts of your worship service?” the respondents reported the following: piano music (79%), hymnals (69%), worship leader (60%), praise team (52%), organ music (47%), praise band (46%), choir-led songs (33%), choir-only songs (32%), music tracks (22%), and orchestra (9%). 88% of Lutheran pastors reported using organ music. Given these statistics, it seems that such a stalemate has been achieved by the ascendency of “CCM” praise teams/bands and the decline of organ music, choirs, and

497 Duke University Chapel, for example, provided the venue for a variety of Bach performances that I participated in throughout the course of this dissertation.
(especially) orchestras. Praise teams/bands did not even exist a few generations ago, yet now they are either as common or more common than organ music, choir and (especially) orchestra. Bach’s music has certainly not disappeared from the ecclesial landscape, but the musical forces he wrote for have certainly receded in influence.

Beyond that shift, the overwhelming majority of western Christian churches (in whatever denomination) either simply do not possess the musical forces necessary to perform Bach’s music regularly or choose to invest those forces in other music.\footnote{According to the Lifeway Research study cited above, more pastors say they struggle to find musicians (21\%) than say they struggle with their congregations’ various musical preferences (15\%).} Even many affluent North American church choirs, which pay dozens of trained singers, struggle to perform Bach’s cantatas as regularly as he composed and performed them. Emmanuel Church in Boston, Massachusetts is almost certainly the only American church committed to performing Bach cantatas on a weekly basis, and only for part of the year.\footnote{According to its website, Emmanuel Church performs weekly Bach cantatas from late September to mid-May (2019-2020 season). See \url{http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/} for further information (accessed October 9, 2020).} In general, the most regular performances of Bach’s music happen outside the church, “as autonomous works in a concert setting,”\footnote{Leaver, in Butt, ed., \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Bach}, 86.} where Bach is celebrated as a musical master but not necessarily as a Christian or even as a theologian.

To claim that Bach would find this situation puzzling is surely understating the matter; he would almost certainly be distressed. What would anger him is \textit{not} the fact that his music is being performed outside the church in “secular” settings. After all, he wrote and performed a great deal of “secular” music, and that music exhibits the same level of
craft and expressive intensity as his “sacred” church music.\textsuperscript{502} Instead, what would anger him is this: his musical brilliance is now most celebrated in a non-theological setting, and the most theological settings (local churches and seminaries) typically care little for his musical brilliance. Today, such theological settings tend to be focused on two matters that make proper appreciation of Bach’s music difficult: a narrow focus on their own particular ecclesial musical traditions to the neglect of broader musical traditions,\textsuperscript{503} and the assumption that “popular music” has rendered “classical music” irrelevant and obsolete. To put it bluntly, Bach would not be pleased that the theological world now cares so little for musical excellence, and that the musical world now cares so little for theological excellence.

5.2.1) Bach in the Contemporary Academy and Church

\textsuperscript{502} See 1.2.6 and especially the contrast between the aria “Zu tanze, zu springe” and the aria “Mit Verlangen” from BWV 201. The former represents Bach’s caricature of galant music; the latter represents Bach’s mature style, whether sacred or secular.

\textsuperscript{503} In the United Methodist Church, for instance, the focus tends to be on Charles Wesley’s (1707–1788) hymn texts. See, for example, the focus on “lyrical theology” in S.T. Kimbrough, \textit{The Lyrical Theology of Charles Wesley} (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011). Far less attention is paid to the quality of the music set to those texts, however, and neither John nor Charles Wesley engaged in the continental musical arguments of their day. Charles’ son Samuel Wesley (1766–1837), however, was an extremely passionate Bach devotee who named his own son after Bach and whose theological and musical convictions led him to convert to Roman Catholicism, a move that seems particularly reasonable in light of this study. Perhaps Samuel could sense (even only knowing Bach’s instrumental works) the metaphysical ambitions of Bach’s music, to which both medieval Catholicism and Luther contributed but for which neither could fully account on their own. For more on Samuel Wesley’s enthusiasm for Bach, see: Samuel Wesley, \textit{Letters of Samuel Wesley to Mr. Benjamin Jacobs, Organist of Surrey Chapel, Relating to the Introduction into this Country of the Works of John Sebastian Bach}, ed. Eliza Wesley (London: S.W. Partridge and Co., 1875).
Bach was not completely opposed to the academy of his day, but his work did require some “spiritual distance” from it, as Laurence Dreyfus explains:

One might well consider how Enlightenment in the first half of the eighteenth century resulted in a kind of near-catastrophe for serious musical artifice: the Enlightenment's naïve worship of nature, its facile hedonism, its uncritically affirmative tone, its appeal to public taste, its privileging of the word over music, its emphasis on clearly distinguishable genres, and its rejection of music as metaphysics. Had Bach been a university-trained musician, it is conceivable that he might have opposed these positions explicitly. On the other hand, given the available conceptual tools for understanding music, it was impossible even for a university-trained intellectual in the 1730s to have articulated these positions or, what is more, to have “held” them at all. Ironically, only a musician poised at some spiritual distance from the leading musical and intellectual thought of his day could have developed such an idiosyncratic brand of interpretation and criticism.  

In other words, even the early Enlightenment academy would have hampered Bach’s creative project if he had not gained such spiritual distance via fierce personal adherence to Lutheran theology. Such spiritual distance is reflected even more by the lack of physical distance between Luther’s writings and Bach’s own home. These books, it would seem, served as a source of theological fortitude and nourishment, from which he would draw his intellectual strength, and against which his opponents would have to argue.

5.3.1) Bach in the Contemporary Academy

In the German academy of the early eighteenth century, Luther’s thought still held significant authority. This is the era before Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the Lutheran-

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504 Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*, 243.
raised philosopher who famously attempted to invert Luther’s approach to the relationship between religion and reason. Indeed, Kant’s difficulties with publishing *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793) show that the German academy was able to assert its own authority against Frederick Wilhelm II’s theological censorship. When the king censured him, Kant resorted to publishing through his philosophical faculty, a move that remains highly symbolic of the epistemological shifts that occurred in the western academy during the Enlightenment.505

One of the present benefits of this new epistemological arrangement is that the post-Enlightenment academy has liberated musicology to do its proper work without direct and constant theological interference. Accordingly, musicological Bach research is now a mature and extremely sophisticated field, which has generated new insights that could have been threatened prematurely by various forms of theological censorship. However, in at least two ways, the contemporary academy has also made the study of Bach’s music more difficult. First, the academic theological world has typically neglected music as a legitimate focus of study for theology. We have already seen this issue, for example, in the work of certain Catholic theologians such as Balthasar and Gilson, but it extends far beyond them. As a group, academic theologians represent a wide range of denominational commitments, and some of those denominations have no reason (internal to their denomination) to take music seriously as theological subject matter. Certain Reformed churches that follow Zwingli or Calvin’s musical proscriptions, for example,

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might understandably avoid musical study altogether, or at least severely restrict it. An extremely strong case can be made against them on theological grounds (particularly the Zwinglians), but no one should be surprised that such Christians have little or no interest in studying Bach. What is surprising, however, is that churches that promote the theological power of music (such as Wesleyan churches) have produced so little academic research on the music of Bach. Second, the contemporary academy has completely dethroned theology from its medieval position as the “queen of the sciences,” in the majority of places, allowing it only to survive as “the study of religion,” which is a very different kind of study. The former is prepared to make first-order truth claims about God; the latter will tend to restrict itself to the second-order description of religious practices and beliefs. This shift makes it much more difficult for contemporary musicologists to understand, in the broadest sense, Bach’s musical metaphysics. For example, any inquiry into Bach’s musical metaphysics must deal with a multi-faceted question such as the following: for Bach, is music something humans create, a gift of God, or some combination of the two? A musicologist can only answer this question if he

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507 Such is, for example, the error John Butt makes when he tries to explain Bach’s musical metaphysics by subsuming Christianity (and Lutheranism especially) into a category such as “most monotheistic religions.” This is the language of religious studies, not the language of Lutheran theology. By considering Bach’s musical metaphysics from the perspective of “religious studies,” he distances his account from the working life and beliefs of Bach himself, whereas, as we have argued, Lutheran theology provides the predominant explanatory framework. For further discussion about the problems related to this framing of Bach’s musical metaphysics, see 4.4.3 b).
or she has a strong grasp of Lutheran theology, and such a grasp is neither required nor expected in the course of a typical musicologist’s educational journey.

5.3.2) The Western Academy from Luther to Contemporary Academia

In order to show how and why this is the case, let me first offer some comments on the state of the academy at the three most important historical moments for this dissertation’s argument: the mature medieval university at the time of Luther, the early modern university at the time of Bach, and the late modern (contemporary) university in which this dissertation is situated. The history of the modern western academy is indeed a long and complex one, and I cannot offer anything resembling an exhaustive account here. Many highly detailed accounts from a theological perspective are already on offer, and I will be using theologically toned brushstrokes that are admittedly broad. I am telling this short story for two reasons: to highlight the fact that the academic authority of theology weakened dramatically from Luther’s time to today, and that, concomitantly, a new form of academic reason gained ascendancy over theology.

The medieval European academy, which both trained and promoted Luther’s intellect, was born out of a belief in the divinely grounded unity of all knowledge. Consider, for example, one of the most famous debates that took place only a few

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generations before Luther was born: the nominalist criticism (put forth by figures such as Ockham and Scotus) of various forms of realism (put forth by figures such as Thomas Aquinas). This debate did not concern the question of whether or not all knowledge comes and find its unity in God; the debate concerned the question of how that knowledge comes from and finds its unity in God. Is the category of “being” univocal or analogical? Can we determine the existence of universals from particulars or is every thing its own individual and irreducible haecceitas? Such philosophical disagreements could occur under the auspices of theology, and Luther’s inheritance of a strand of nominalism (as we saw at the beginning of the last chapter) should be understood in this context.509

The medieval academy of Luther was so theologically and spiritually fruitful that Luther’s own spiritual mentor, Johann von Staupitz (1460-1524), could recommend academic training as an antidote to Luther’s debilitating feelings of spiritual inadequacy.510 This academic training led Luther into a healthy and productive

509 See 4.3.2.
510 As Dragseth puts it, “(Luther’s) inability to be like Christ, prior to and then in the monastery, only worsened his feelings of worthlessness and meaninglessness, what Luther called his Anfechtungen—anxiety, trials, despair.” Dragseth, *The Devil’s Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 3. In his Luther biography, Roland Bainton describes the influence of Staupitz on Luther’s academic direction thus: “Evidently (Staupitz) suspected Luther of thriving on his disturbances. The only word of reassurance he could give was a reminder that the blood of Christ was shed for the remission of sins. But Luther was too obsessed with the picture of Christ the avenger to be consoled with the thought of Christ the Redeemer. Staupitz then cast about for some effective cure for this tormented spirit. He recognized in him a man of moral earnestness, religious sensitivity, and unusual gifts. Why his difficulties should be so enormous and so persistent was baffling. Plainly argument and consolation did no good. Some other way must be found. One day under the pear tree in the garden of the Augustinian cloister—Luther always treasured that pear tree—the vicar informed Brother Martin that he should study for his doctor’s degree, that he should undertake preaching and assume the chair of Bible at the university. Luther gasped, stammered out
theological career, which included his various warnings about the dangers of human reason. This is critical to understand: from an academic post, Luther could express concern about the ability of human reason to attack the Christian faith. Human reason is subject to the effects of the fall, just like every other human faculty, and Luther knew intimately how effectively it could convince people either that they are irredeemable sinners or that they are so morally perfect that they do not need God at all. Both extremes might seem “rational” to many, but both fall outside the bounds of Christian theology, which claims that all human beings are sinners in need of God’s grace and that such gracious redemption is possible. Of all the complex and confusing issues about Luther’s life and thought, this one remains fairly simple and clear: in Christian theology, reason should play a ministerial role, not a majesterial role.

By the time Bach was an active professional musician, the medieval academy was already undergoing significant changes. This is an era of tremendous intellectual upheaval, in which the late medieval world is slowly transitioning into the early modern world. In theology, the authoritative grip of medieval Catholicism has now loosened and pockets of reformed Christianity have sprouted up in universities across Europe. In natural science, for example, Sir Francis Bacon’s (1561-1626) searing critiques of Aristotelian methodology have gained intellectual interest and launched a new epistemological trajectory. And shortly after Bach’s death, we observe the rise of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who, as mentioned above, would soon write a book whose

fifteen reasons why he could do nothing of the sort. The sum of it all was that so much work would kill him. ‘Quite all right,’ said Staupitz. ‘God has plenty of work for clever men to do in heaven.’” Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 45.

511 See, for example, the encyclopedia of Sir Thomas Browne, Pseudodoxia Epidemica (1646).
premise would surely concern both Luther and Bach (Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft). Both Luther and Bach would certainly prefer the inverted title of Nicholas Wolterstorff’s book, “Reason within the Bounds of Religion.”⁵¹²

Bach’s relationship to his own early modern European academy cannot be neatly categorized. It certainly seems as though Bach did not need the academy in order to achieve his ambitious and rigorous musical program. As already mentioned, he never even attended university, and when he sought knowledge, he was apparently more likely to consult fellow practicing musicians (such as Dietrich Buxtehude living hundreds of miles away) or from his own personal library than from academic lectures at his nearby university. There is no record of Bach involving himself in the intellectual affairs of the universities of his day, and as cited above, at least one contemporary Bach scholar thinks that involving himself in the university would have threatened his entire musical project.⁵¹³ Also consider, for example, the coupling of Johann August Ernesti’s (1707-1781) disapproval of musical exegesis and his own prestigious academic position. This was a time when people such as Ernesti were considered to be on the cutting edge of academic work, while Bach was considered to be old fashioned by Scheibe. In order to write the sort of music he did, Bach would have had to oppose much (if not most) of the early Enlightenment academy from the “spiritual distance” Dreyfus describes. The library that nourished his musical life the most was not at the local university; it was in his own home, and he bought the books he needed with his own money.

⁵¹² Nicholas Wolterstorff, Reason Within the Bounds of Religion (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1984).
⁵¹³ See 5.2.1.
At the same time, however, it would be a major mistake to present Bach as a complete antagonist of the early Enlightenment academy. For example, after the lack of a university degree rendered his application to the Leipzig cantorate rather undesirable (though ultimately successful), he made sure to enroll his eldest sons at Leipzig University. Moreover, when Bach felt compelled to respond to Scheibe’s critique, he did so by using the argumentative skills of his friend Johann Abraham Birnbaum, a professor of rhetoric at Leipzig University. Such a move strongly suggests that Bach believed that Luther’s theological aesthetics (and the role of music therein) still survived in his nearby university, even as people such as Scheibe and Ernesti were trying to reformulate it or eradicate it altogether. Bach therefore had a theological and musical stake in the early Enlightenment academy, even though it was not his natural working environment.

To demonstrate, in musical and textual terms, Bach’s position between the medieval university of Luther and the late modern university of today, let us briefly analyze BWV 2, a cantata that addresses this subject matter directly. Bach frames his cantata with text from Luther’s hymn “Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein” and fills in the intervening movements with text from an unknown librettist, itself based on the intervening stanzas from Luther. Yet whereas Luther’s hymn text focuses on the general contrast between divine truth and human falsehood, Bach’s cantata text specifies the nature of that human falsehood. In particular, Bach apparently wanted his listener to understand the dangers of human reason, a theme Luther repeatedly expressed but did not make explicit in his original hymn.

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514 NBR, 249-250.
Bach retains the first line of Luther’s second stanza, which reads: “Sie lehren eitel falsche List.” The next lines loosely follow the trajectory of Luther’s hymn, criticizing those who trust the inventions of their own wits and pointing to the communal divisions caused thereby. Yet here Bach introduces a couple of new elements into Luther’s text, such as the claim that the “inventions of their own wits” must “replace the Bible” (anstatt der Bibel stehn) and that “foolish reason is their guide” (Die törichte Vernunft ist ihr Kompaß). Bach then continues to follow Luther’s direction, and even intensifies the aesthetic language Luther uses to mock the mere outward appearance of godless people! Luther’s text only criticizes their false beauty in passing; Bach’s cantata text describes the deathly stench of their false beauty in vivid detail (Sie gleichen denen Totengräbern // Die, ob sie zwar von außen schön, // Nur Stank und Moder in sich fassen // Und lauter Unflat sehen lassen).

It seems rather obvious what Bach is doing here. Although he did not make a habit of thrusting himself into the thick of Enlightenment controversies, Bach was surely aware of the burgeoning forms of rationalism all around him. This textual adjustment can therefore be seen as an attempt to retain the outlines of Luther’s thought while simultaneously updating it for an era in which people are increasingly trying to extract reason from theology and “replace the Bible” with new forms of human reason. Bach, with one of the most logical of all musical minds, must have been concerned that reason could flatter itself and try to overtake the authority of theology altogether, and he would

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515 Bach’s resistance to Ernesti’s rationalist incursion into proper musical affairs serves as one example, while Bach’s out-reasoning of Frederick the Great, his hyper-rationalist king, serves as another.
likely be horrified that one of Luther’s most important maxims – that humans are justified by God and not by themselves – had fallen by the academic wayside.

This dissertation is situated in the late modern, or “postmodern,” western academy, where many would argue that two main forces now battle for supremacy: “Wissenschaft” rationalism of the modern German research university, and postmodern skepticism about the claims of that sort of university. Important for understanding this present battle is the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), whose virulent criticisms of the Enlightenment, it has been argued, contributed heavily to a diverse array of new academic trajectories that remain with us today. In the crudest of terms, the ongoing ascendancy of the “STEM” fields testifies to the legacy of the German research model, and the dominance of interpretive suspicion in the humanities (especially in literature and cultural studies) testifies to the legacy of Nietzsche. The social sciences

516 John Milbank puts his analysis of modern social theory thus: “I am concerned with what is common to the outlook of the major Nietzscheans, and I deliberately treat the writings of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida as elaborations of a single nihilistic philosophy.” John Milbank, Theology as Social Theory, second edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 278. Roger Kimball has even claimed that comparative literature departments are home to “cozy nihilists”: “Nietzsche snidely remarked that Christianity was “Platonism for the masses.” In the academy today we have what we might call Nietzscheanism for the masses,” as squads of cozy nihilists parrot his ideas and attitudes. Nietzsche’s contention that truth is merely “a moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms,” for example, has become a veritable mantra in comparative literature departments across the country.” Roger Kimball, “The Legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche,” The New Criterion 10, no. 1, (1991): 28.

517 In the modern American research university, “STEM” is an oft-used acronym that groups Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics together, in distinction from the social sciences (typically sociology, political science, economics, and psychology) and the humanities. For an example of a recent study related to educational dose in “STEM” fields, see: Wai, Lubinski, Benbow, Steiger, “Accomplishment in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and its relation to STEM educational dose: A 25-year longitudinal study,” Journal of Educational Psychology 102, no. 4, (November 2010): 860-871.
attempt to occupy a noble but precarious position seemingly “in between” these two poles, using both scientific and humanistic methodology to produce new knowledge.\textsuperscript{518}

Despite this rather variegated academic landscape, there is simply no question about which side of the academy still holds the most authority: the German \textit{Wissenschaft} side. The “STEM” fields are “rational” in precisely the way German Enlightenment thinkers desired: they consistently create (\textit{schaffen}) new knowledge (\textit{Wissen}) and are rewarded accordingly. Apart from collegiate athletics, no other arena of the modern academy can compare to the fundraising power of “STEM.” In recent decades, the “STEM” fields have surged in a variety of ways,\textsuperscript{519} and the constant attempts of social scientists to be welcomed into the “STEM” world suggest that they, too, recognize the hegemony of the \textit{Wissenschaft} model.

Accordingly, one force that has almost entirely disappeared from the contemporary western academy is also the force that created it in the first place: Christian theology.\textsuperscript{520} It survives in Christian seminaries that remain attached to research

\textsuperscript{518} Consider, for example, the claim of neuroscientist/psychologist John Cacciopo that psychology constitutes a “hub science,” with tentacles reaching deep into the territory of both “STEM” and the humanities. John Cacciopo, “Psychology is a Hub Science,” \textit{Observer} of the Association of Psychological Science (September 2007). \url{https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/psychology-is-a-hub-science} (accessed October 9, 2020).


\textsuperscript{520} See, for example, how James Tunstead Burtchaell explains the collapse of theological study in the twentieth-century American university in \textit{The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 822: “Just when the churches were developing these manifold powers to engage in broad-spectrum, scholarly, and critical discourse, however, a great failure of nerve devastated their capacity to be worthy patrons of higher education. Just when scholars had begun to be equipped to teach serious theology, colleges and
universities (such as Duke University Divinity School, the locale of this dissertation) and perhaps in courses about Christian theology in religion departments. But Christian theology as a distinct field of study in which students are permitted and encouraged to make claims about God rather than merely about religion or religious experience, much less such a field that would have some form of authority over other disciplines? That form of Christian theology no longer exists in the late modern western academy, except in explicitly Christian universities and seminaries. Theology once sat above both the medieval quadrivium and trivium; now, the quadrivium sits above the trivium, and theology has no authority over either. Such a shift makes the academic study of Bach incredibly difficult, as I will now explain.

5.3.3) Bach in the Contemporary Academy

In Luther’s ideal academic structure, theology and musicology would reign supreme. Theology would obviously and understandably sit atop his hierarchy of academic disciplines, with music just below (or “next”) to theology. Such a conception would have provided Bach with the authority to do at least two critical things: a) conduct new investigations into the nature of musical sound, and b) make the fruits of those musical investigations amenable to theological use. Accordingly, this framework enabled universities implicitly decided that serious theology was not appropriate. This promise of theology as a mature discipline seemed to occur on the very eve of the defection by each denominational cadre of colleges and universities from the claim or aspiration to teach it. For the liberal Protestants this was occurring around the turn of the century; for the Catholics it awaited the 1960s.”

521 See 3.2.2.
Bach to produce a striking appropriation of pagan philosophical wisdom into the Christian theological enterprise.

The very medieval Luther set the stage for him, lodging Pythagorean/Platonic music theory in his doctrine of creation and even endorsing Aristotelian artistic theory as useful for Christian edification (as we saw in the previous chapter).\textsuperscript{522} Bach stepped onto this stage and performed much of what Luther would have fervently desired: music that renders Greek wisdom captive to Christ. Accordingly, in Bach’s music there is a sense that he wanted to dramatically expand the metaphysical ambitions of Greek music. Pythagoras wanted musical mathematics to explain the entire world, but for Luther and Bach he was just reaching around and groping for his unknown God, as St. Paul put it in his description of Greek philosophy.\textsuperscript{523} Bach knew his God intimately, and believed that this God had indeed arranged everything by order and number. But Bach also believed that his God had lovingly created the \textit{entire} world, and he would proclaim that God to anyone with ears to hear.

Reason and mathematics, therefore, did not actually constrict Bach’s musical project; they liberated it. Reason was not just a “snare” to Bach, as Taruskin put it.\textsuperscript{524} Bach could \textit{use} reason and math to do a whole range of things: paint natural images in musical sound, express emotion, or inspire people to dance, to take but a few examples of the many examples one could present. Even Nietzsche, who was often so insightful when writing about Germanic music and modern foolishness, proves himself to be a rather

\textsuperscript{522} See 4.3.2.
\textsuperscript{523} Acts 17:26-27 NIV, “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.”
\textsuperscript{524} See 4.4.3. a).
pedestrian modernist when it comes to understanding Bach’s rationality. Martin Zenck describes Nietzsche’s confusion about Bach’s combination of mathematical rigor and spiritual mystery well:

Although Nietzsche speaks of a ‘mighty course,’ the succession of heroes Bach-Beethoven-Wagner appears odd to him, principally because it cannot be explained rationally or by a concept of beauty. This is surprising, because he initially assigns the ‘arithmetical abacus of fugue’, i.e., mathematical beauty, to Bach’s music, only later to maintain that this is not an adequate explanation of its mysterious foundations. In his early work *The birth of tragedy*, Nietzsche does not fall prey to the myth of the numerically determined rationality of Bach. He senses something more behind Bach’s music but at the same time does not want to mythologise this inkling. Two aphorisms from the later book *Human, all too human*, in the chapter entitled ‘From the souls of artists and writers’, pick up once again where this earlier reflection left off. Although aphorism 218 addresses architecture and the ‘modern’ music brought into being by these composers, behind the beauty of their artifice, one can detect a ‘higher order of things’, ‘the feeling of inexhaustible significance’. Thus Nietzsche emphasises that without ‘that profoundly religious conversion, without that resounding of the deeply agitated heart, music would have remained scholarly or operatic’.  

In this way, Nietzsche can be seen as a somewhat tragic figure in modernity. He rightly senses that Bach is not determined by mathematical rationality, but at the same time he cannot explain the mysterious spiritual foundations of that very mathematical rationality. We are used to Nietzsche destroying modern myths; we are not used to Nietzsche being confused by a modern figure committed to myth. Unfortunately, by the time of Nietzsche, the authority of Lutheran theology had weakened so much that even a Lutheran pastor’s son could not explain Bach’s music by using Lutheran theology. The Christological

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answers to Nietzsche’s questions were not far from him at all, yet even he succumbed to the unnecessary modern binary of “mathematics against mystery.”

Accordingly, the experience of studying Bach in the late modern western academy is a profoundly disturbing one. In the humanities world – which Nietzsche has profoundly influenced and which yet still remains a home for Bach as musician and literary figure – ignorance of Lutheran theology remains the status quo. Purely “humanistic” studies of Bach will therefore never understand him well. On the other side, many heroes of the “STEM” world, such as Albert Einstein and Steve Jobs, have praised Bach lavishly. Bach has even been widely celebrated as a “musical scientist,” evidenced by Christoph Wolff’s description of him as such in his Bach biography, which nearly won the Pulitzer Prize. Bach is a figure who commands respect all across the contemporary academy, yet because of the extreme displacement of theology in that academy, he is also one of its most misunderstood and caricatured figures.

At this point, having claimed (and hopefully shown) that modern academics often misconstrue Bach’s music, it is perhaps fair that I should offer the outlines of a constructive proposal for how Bach might be studied more fruitfully in the contemporary academy. A full proposal would require an entire dissertation in itself, but here I will offer a sketch of such a proposal drawing upon one of the most important theological treatments of the modern academy in existence: John Henry Newman’s (1801-1890) The Idea of the University. In it, Newman establishes a framework that can be fruitfully

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527 John Henry Newman, The Idea of the University (Washington: Wegnery, 1999). Mike Higton offers appreciation for Newman’s proposal while nevertheless critiquing it for not being theological enough. “His account of intellectual virtue,” he writes, “and of the assured path that it enables its possessors to take through the marshes of a media-
applied to our understanding of the relationship of theology and musicology without
denigrating the integrity of either.\footnote{528} Central to his academic vision is the idea that
theology should sit above all disciplines, both in order to liberate their own proper
spheres of explanation and to restrict them from trying to usurp the proper authority of
theology. Newman’s proposal may sound old-fashioned, and many academics will surely
scoff at the idea of reinvigorating it, but it is one of the few modern academic proposals
that can actually make proper sense of Bach’s music.

Newman rightly recognizes that Christian theologians invented the European
university, and that the very name of “university” testifies to a unifying explanatory
source: theology. Christian theology, by its very nature, attempts to be a comprehensive
explanatory framework, beginning with the creation of the world and ending with its
eschatological consummation. No other academic discipline, including philosophy,
saturated environment, is a powerful one, but his nature-grace framework ensures that
Christian faith is presented largely as a set of guy ropes holding down (and holding in
shape) a tent whose fabric is not itself theological.” Mike Higton, *A Theology of Higher
Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 105. It is not clear, however, that
Higton’s characterization of this nature-grace distinction is accurate. In Newman’s
scheme (and the Thomistic one that undergirds it), the idea of “nature” is not necessarily
“non-theological.” For example, even in the first article of the first question of the *Prima
Pars*, Thomas Aquinas distinguishes natural reason from the grace of divine revelation
within the context of divine providence, arguing that “it was necessary that man should be
taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover,
would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of
many errors. Whereas man’s whole salvation, which is in God, depends upon the
knowledge of this truth. Therefore, in order that the salvation of men might be brought
about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths
by divine revelation. It was therefore necessary that, besides philosophical science built
up by reason there should be a sacred science learned through revelation.” Thomas

\footnote{528} Newman proposed this vision of the university as an explicitly Catholic one, and in
that sense it could be argued that it should not be applied to modern secular universities.
But that friction is perhaps the point of introducing Newman here: Bach’s music owes
more to the medieval Catholic university than is generally accounted for in the modern
secular university.
attempts to be so comprehensive. An academic atheist may attempt to discredit theology as a discipline altogether, but such a person is straining against the founding ideals of the academy in which they now profess membership. Much more could be said about the dangers of atheism in the academy, but that would take us far afield from the driving concerns of this study.

Newman rightly places theology atop his hierarchy of disciplines, but he also rightly accords other disciplines their own spheres of influence. He gives substantial attention to explaining how this balancing act can occur. For example, he offers this reflection on the relationship of musicology to theology:

The art of painting, however, is peculiar: Music and Architecture are more ideal, and their respective archetypes, even if not supernatural, at least are abstract and unearthly; and yet what I have been observing about Painting, holds, I think, analogously, in the marvelous development which Musical Science has undergone in the last century. Doubtless here too the highest genius may be made subservient to Religion; here too, still more simply than in the case of Painting, the Science has a field of its own, perfectly innocent, into which Religion does not and need not enter.\textsuperscript{529}

Here Newman rightly respects the internal integrity of musicology. Theology, by definition, cannot answer a question such as “what notes constitute a major triad?” But musicology, like any field, can attempt to exceed its own explanatory bounds and become a quasi-religion itself:

On the other hand here also, in the case of Music as of Painting, it is certain Religion must be alive and on the defensive, for, if its servants sleep, a potent enchantment will steal over it. Music, I suppose, though this is not the place to enlarge upon it, has an object of its own; as mathematical science also, it is the expression of ideas greater and more profound than any in the visible world, ideas, which centre indeed in Him

\textsuperscript{529} Newman, \textit{The Idea of the University}, 73.
whom Catholicism manifests, who is the seat of all beauty, order, and perfection whatever, still ideas after all which are not those on which Revelation directly and principally fixes our gaze. If then a great master in this mysterious science… throws himself on his own gift, trusts its inspirations, and absorbs himself in those thoughts which, though they come to him in the way of nature, belong to things above nature, it is obvious he will neglect everything else. Rising in his strength, he will break through the trammels of words, he will scatter human voices, even the sweetest, to the winds; he will be borne upon nothing less than the fullest flood of sounds which art has enabled him to draw from mechanical contrivances; he will go forth as a giant, as far as ever his instruments can reach, starting from their secret depths fresh and fresh elements of beauty and grandeur as he goes, and pouring them together into still more marvelous and rapturous combinations.\footnote{ibid., 74.}

Here Newman could be referring to anyone from Monteverdi to Bach to Beethoven and beyond; he is only describing the potential of gifted musical scientists in the abstract. But as he continues, he makes a distinction that was lost on the German Romantics who tried to retroactively adopt Bach into the “absolute music” movement.\footnote{Daniel K.A. Chua, \textit{Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning}, 67: “The quarrel (between ancient and modern music) only stopped when the nineteenth century canonised Baroque music, particularly through the deification of Bach in the eternal pantheon of absolute music.”} Some composers, according to Newman, made themselves scholars of Christian theology, not just music:

But, should he happen to be attracted, as he well may, by the sublimity, so congenial to him, of the Catholic doctrine and ritual, should he engage in sacred themes, should he resolve by means of his art to do honour to the Mass, or the Divine Office—is it not certain, from the circumstances of the case, that he will be carried on rather to use Religion than to minister to it, unless Religion is strong on its own ground, and reminds him that, if he would do honour to the highest of subjects, he must make himself its scholar, must humbly follow the thoughts given him, and must aim at the glory, not of his own gift, but of the Great Giver?\footnote{Newman, 73-74.}
In the history of modern western sacred music, examples of the former are legion. A modern western composer need not read or write tomes of theology in order to write a musically excellent Mass or Requiem, and many (if not most) of them did not. But Newman also proposes the possibility of the latter option: a supremely gifted musician who has chosen to embrace Christian theology and make his own musical program subservient to that theological enterprise. Such is, of course, Bach.

In this academic scheme, Bach should be one of the most celebrated figures in the pantheon of the modern university. Even though few academics seemingly care about why we still call it a “uni-versity,” and even though Bach never even attended university, Bach’s music testifies to that which the medieval academy of Luther took for granted: the theological integration of knowledge. For Luther and Bach, music was second only to theology and could even stand above the quadrivium and trivium on its own (as visualized in Johann Crueger’s Titelkupfer).\textsuperscript{533} Long before the full flourishing of modern science, when Baconian science was still in its relative infancy, Bach was writing music that would be praised both by later scientists and humanists. Bach’s music stretches well across the university, founded in theology but touching on musicology, physics, literature, painting, drama, biology and a range of other fields. The fractured modern university, however, can only understand Bach’s music as “interdisciplinary work,” rather than the seemingly unremarkable description Bach would almost certainly have given it: the next step in proper Lutheran church music.

When Bach’s innovations in Lutheran church music reached full maturity, well beyond anything on offer at any German university at the time, his rationalist king

\textsuperscript{533} See 3.2.3.
summoned him in order to expose him. Frederick the Great wanted to score a major point for the Enlightenment, and he surely expected to surprise Bach with such a nasty, unwelcome theme. Unfortunately for Frederick, however, the musician he chose was far more musically knowledgeable than him. Bach dazzled the audience then and there, before returning home to write additional music to fill out the musical profile even further. Bach had out-reasoned his rationalist king with something more beautiful than Frederick himself could even imagine.\footnote{See 1.2.9.}

A few years after this embarrassment of Frederick, the mortal life of Johann Sebastian Bach would come to an end. And as legend would have it, his last words were about stepping before the throne of a different sort of king, as Jaroslav Pelikan explains:

\begin{quote}
It may not be accurate but it is still true. For after having stood before the most enlightened throne of the Aufklärung at Potsdam three years before and having demonstrated to the king there both his brilliant rationality and his virtuosity, he now stood before another Throne and another King, who dwelt indeed in rationality but even more in mystery.\footnote{Jaroslav Pelikan, \textit{Bach Among the Theologians} (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 41.}
\end{quote}

The rationalist king gave Bach the most ungestalt melody he could find, and Bach used all the reason he could muster to render it into a new artistic form – a form that gave his listeners a foretaste of the schönerer Gestalt achieved by his own crucified King.

5.4.1) Bach in the Contemporary Church

This section pivots from the contemporary academy to the contemporary church, and just as that section provided a brief historical narration, so will this one. In order to
comment usefully on the situation of Bach’s music in the contemporary church, we must also briefly outline some key features of the state and character of the church in the eras of Luther and Bach.

Bach was born into established Lutheranism, though by his day, divisions between the “orthodox” and “Pietist” branches of Lutheranism were already underway. Now, the early divisions within Lutheranism pale in comparison to the more recent proliferation of Protestant denominations. Today, Bach represents a transitional period in church history, situated between the fledgling medieval reformation that preceded him and the exacerbated modern ecclesial divisions that would follow him.

Martin Luther is most famous, of course, as an ecclesial reformer. His virulent attacks on the leadership of the medieval Catholic Church, which were disseminated widely through nascent printing technology, spawned an institutional break far more severe than that of any previous reformers (such as John Wycliffe). Although Luther himself made it clear that he was trying to re-form the existing church, many of his followers believed that Luther’s critiques necessitated the formation of a new church altogether. Accordingly, within a few generations after Luther’s death, new ecclesial formations cropped up across Europe, both within Lutheranism (such as the divide between its “orthodox” and “Pietist” versions) and without (such as the reforms of John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, and the entire English Reformation).

Bach was born into this sort of ecclesial landscape, as we have seen. He was raised in a rather traditional orthodox Lutheran family, and the overwhelming majority of his educational institutions, chosen ecclesial affiliations, and working environments were

\[536\] See 4.2.1.
likewise orthodox Lutheran. Several aspects of his life and work, however, show that he was well aware of, and perhaps even attracted to, forms of Christianity outside of orthodox Lutheranism. For example, Markus Rathey has noticed that unlike the secular cantatas of his later Lutheran Leipzig years, Bach’s secular music at the Calvinist court of Cöthen is full of theological language.\textsuperscript{537} Such a distinction suggests that Bach was well aware of, and possibly appreciative of, Calvin’s embrace of explicitly Christian music in the domestic sphere. Moreover, Bach’s own theological library contains a range of works written by Pietists, and not just figures such as Arndt who lived and worked before the split between “the orthodox” and “the Pietists” became so pronounced. Bach owned many works from leaders of the Pietist movement, as we saw earlier.\textsuperscript{538} Bach also owned a copy of the sermons of Johannes Tauler (1300-1361), a medieval mystic beloved by Luther but treated with suspicion by many orthodox Lutherans in Bach’s time.\textsuperscript{539}

The most accurate and succinct way to frame Bach’s own chosen ecclesiastical position, then, would be something along these lines: Bach cared far more about being faithful to Luther’s theology itself than about aligning himself with any narrow post-Luther ecclesial division.\textsuperscript{540} He never formally disavowed his orthodox Lutheran


\textsuperscript{538} See 2.3.3.

\textsuperscript{539} See, for example, Wilhelm Hossbach’s biography of Spener, which Jon Bartley Stewart analyzes in his book \textit{Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions} (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), 269-271. By the time of Bach, Tauler’s influence on Pietism (through Luther, Arndt, and then to Spener) was well established, and Lutheran Orthodoxy had defined itself against this strain of influence.

\textsuperscript{540} Here I must distinguish between two senses of “orthodox” in our study of Bach’s relationship to Lutheranism. I have been arguing for an “orthodox” reading of that relationship (the explanatory sources of Bach’s music are to be found in Lutheran theology, not in hypothetical sources outside that realm). I have \textit{not}, however, been
membership, but its rationalist strand would have certainly concerned him. Faced with
the burgeoning rationalism of certain nominally orthodox Lutherans (such as Johann
August Ernesti), Bach would have preferred the emotional intimacy and mystical
devotion of Pietists (such as Spener and Francke). And against the musical proscriptions
of Pietism, Bach obviously preferred the ongoing work of the orthodox Lutheran musical
tradition. Neither rationalist orthodox Lutherans nor Pietists were fully consistent with
the theology of Luther himself, but each retained something significant within it. In order
to test all these versions of Lutheranism around him, Bach apparently felt it necessary to
buy, read, and analyze Luther’s writings directly. So he did, and as I have tried to
demonstrate, his version was more faithful to Luther than anything else on offer at the
time.

Bach died in 1750, and since his death, ecclesial divisions have only exploded.
Today, the division between orthodox Lutheranism and Pietism looks like a small
squabble between two brothers of the same father. In North America alone, dozens of
Lutheran denominations have already gone defunct, and an additional three dozen or so
still exist. Outside of Lutheranism, the situation is hardly different. Denominational
schism has become the norm for Protestant churches since Bach’s time, and only small

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arguing that Bach was a purely “orthodox Lutheran” figure in the history of Lutheranism.
For example, consider a scholar pointing out Pietistic influences in Bach’s music. This
would be an example of “orthodox” Bach-Luther studies even while showing that Bach
was influenced by people outside of eighteenth-century “orthodox Lutheranism.” The key
point is that Leibniz and (especially) Spinoza are not representative of Lutheranism at all.
Leibniz was raised a Lutheran but rarely engaged Luther’s thought throughout his work;
Spinoza is entirely outside the orbit of Lutheran theology. Descartes, Spinoza and
Leibnitz can rightly be considered some of the most influential early modern figures.
None of them, however, used Luther’s theology as the basis for their thought. In this way,
they are qualitatively distinct from Pietistic figures such as Spener and Francke.
movements toward unity, such as the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, have actually stemmed this tide with some limited success.  

5.4.2) Studying Bach in the Contemporary Church

Such ecclesial transformations have also changed the way the church produces and performs music, and here we will explore the situation of Bach’s music in our contemporary ecclesial environment. For one of the great ironies of Bach’s legacy is that his music is now more celebrated outside the church than inside. Secular academic musicologists, as we have seen, typically revere him and his impact on the course of western musical history. And commercial advertisers, to take another example, commonly use his music in the backgrounds of their advertisements, both to soothe their would-be consumers and excite them. Moreover, Steve Jobs, certainly no Christian or church representative, was nevertheless a Bach lover who chose to introduce the new capabilities of the iPad by playing Bach from it. And as mentioned above, the most common locale of Bach performances is now a secular concert setting.

543 “On the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks the music of Bach was at the World Trade Center site, played by Yo-Yo Ma; Yo-Yo’s friend Steve Jobs introduced the iPad to

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Yet despite Bach’s steady rise in academic and cultural appreciation over the past century or so, his position in the church has not risen accordingly. If anything, it has actually decayed significantly. There was a time, only a century or so ago, when Christian theologians and pastors could win Nobel Peace Prizes while simultaneously making Bach’s music a very high priority in their work. Such is the case with both Albert Schweitzer and Nathan Söderblom, and this connection between Bach’s music and social peace is at the very heart of this study. Since that era, however, the western church has increasingly lost its academic and cultural hegemony, and instead of reinvigorating its own musical tradition (which would almost necessarily involve Bach in some manner), the church has typically chosen to imitate the music that is most “popular” or “relevant” in a given time and place. Appeals to fashion apparently never go out of fashion, and the church currently lives in a neo-Scheibian age.

Given Scheibe’s antagonistic role in this study, we might be tempted at this point to lambaste all of the so-called “contemporary Christian music” (CCM) that has dominated church music for decades now, but I will refrain from doing so. After all, this study has not been primarily focused on theological and musical criteria for all Christians in all times and all places; it has been focused on the Lutheran roots of Bach’s conception of beauty. Therefore, I am not attempting to dismiss all of CCM in the name of Bach. I am attempting to locate Bach in this contemporary ecclesial musical landscape, and then to show that his music should be taken more seriously within it. That attempt necessarily


544 This chapter, footnote 17.

545 Nathan Söderblom (1866-1931) was a Lutheran pastor and theologian who promoted Bach’s music and received the 1930 Nobel Peace Prize for his ecumenical efforts.
includes the naming of both the benefits and problems of the contemporary western church for Bach studies.

Among the various features of the contemporary church that bode well for a positive reception of Bach within it, I will name three: a) the church still has a vested interest in promoting and performing Bach’s music, b) it remains committed to addressing human pain and suffering through music, and c) it cares about the historical continuity from Luther to Bach to the present day. Let us take each in turn, before moving to the related problems.

First, and most obviously, the church has a permanent interest in the texts and ideas that make up Bach’s sacred vocal music. Both surviving Passion oratorios (John and Matthew) place the scriptural account of Christ’s crucifixion at the very core of the libretto, and most of the sacred cantatas quote scripture directly (and often more than once in a single cantata). Even if a contemporary Christian might not approve of the music or poetic commentary that so often accompanies these scriptural quotations, he or she has no choice but to endorse the musical use of scripture itself. Even Jesus sung hymns based in Jewish scripture, a moment Bach includes in the St. Matthew Passion.\(^ {546} \) In the contemporary academy, on the other hand, it is entirely possible that Bach’s music could fall out of fashion. Apart from permanent musicological standards of excellence (which do not exist and likely never could, at least in the form of an academic consensus), nothing in principle necessitates the ongoing authority, or even survival, of Bach’s music in the contemporary academy. On the other hand, in principle, Scripture can never fall out of fashion in the church. Even today, when Bach’s music has largely

\(^{546}\) Matthew 26:30, “und da sie den Lobgesang gesprochen hatten.”
fallen out of fashion in the church, its basis in scripture is a key argument for its ecclesial revitalization.

Accordingly, and secondly, the church has a particular interest in using music to do something Scripture explicitly commands all Christians to do: console people who are suffering. Luther made it clear that he wanted music to function this way, and the previous chapter should have hopefully shown that Bach latched onto this claim and intensified it musically. Today, this scriptural injunction still holds authority even in CCM circles, as evidenced by the quotation, cited at the beginning of this chapter, from leading church musician Chris Tomlin. Should anyone think that this claim is meaningless because music can only console, that person should learn about the phenomenon of “music torture,” whereby music is used to inflict enough pain in a prisoner that he or she would divulge secrets in order to relieve that pain. In that light, Bach and Chris Tomlin are not stylistic enemies; they are Christian brothers committed to musical consolation.

Unfortunately, however, when it comes to the music of Bach, the church also has much to repent of. Studying Bach in the contemporary church is bewildering because today Bach represents, perhaps more than any other figure, the church’s failure of nerve in modernity. As Mark Noll has made clear in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, American Protestantism (and especially its evangelical/fundamentalist wings) has abrogated its responsibility to carry forth the Christian intellectual tradition. In the first place, American Protestantism has often caricatured Luther, treating him as a theological

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renegade who wished to dispense with medieval Christianity (and its intellectual rigor) altogether. The medieval roots of Luther’s thought, which have given rise to the idea of a “Catholic Luther,” have been overlooked if not intentionally ignored. Lost is the Luther who “promised in 1529 to write a book against parents who neglected the education of their children,” and who believed that “cultivating the mind was absolutely essential… because people needed to understand both the word of Scripture and the nature of the world in which the word would take root.” This consonance between “the word of Scripture” and “the nature of the world” is deeply scriptural, and it is precisely one of the key Christological elements Bach picked up from Luther. Yet in contemporary American Protestantism, the “word of Scripture” and “the nature of the world” have become so tragically divorced that “creation” and “evolution” now often compete over the same explanatory space as “scriptural” and “natural” explanations. American Protestants have not given up on the modern academy entirely, but their interest and influence has receded dramatically, to the extent that only two significant traces remain: the historical (but now largely defunct) association between universities

548 See, for example: David S. Yeago, “The Catholic Luther,” First Things (March 1996). https://www.firstthings.com/article/1996/03/the-catholic-luther (accessed October 9, 2020). Moreover, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland holds a close relationship with the Catholic Church, both in custom and in its adoption of Catholic doctrinal principles such as the virgin birth.


550 Noll, 37.

551 This is particularly tragic because there is no good reason, in principle, that creationism and evolution must conflict with each other. Maturation anthropology in the work of Irenaeus of Lyons, for example, is an early conceptual framework for reconciling the two. See: Etienne Gilson, From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again: A Journey in Final Causality, Species, and Evolution (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009).
and their founding churches,\textsuperscript{552} and the recent rise of Christian colleges and universities (such as Wheaton and Baylor) that maintain an intentional distance from the secular academy. Moreover, the recent emergence of the so-called “Benedict Option,” proposed by Rod Dreher as “a strategy for Christians in a post-Christian nation,” shows just how disillusioned many Christians have become with the modern secular academy.\textsuperscript{553}

An obvious casualty of the divorce between the contemporary church and academy is that the church has largely insulated itself from the insights of the musicological academy. This is especially tragic (and ironic) because the musicological academy has tended to place Bach, a church musician, in its very highest echelons of musical excellence.\textsuperscript{554} When it comes to evaluating the quality of musical works, the contemporary musicological academy rightly promotes Bach and demotes (or even ignores) contemporary Christian music. This is not to say that CCM has no theological or spiritual value; it is to say, however, that if someone has spent much of their life studying Bach (or Mozart, or Beethoven, or any number of other “classical” composers), the music of CCM will probably not interest them much. The music is extremely, and intentionally, basic. Accordingly, the following critique is directed primarily at the modern Protestant church, and even more particularly at the evangelical and fundamentalist branches of it,

\textsuperscript{552} See, for example: Burtchaell, \textit{The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches}.  
which have promoted CCM more than any other church body. The Roman Catholic Church has remained capacious in its interaction with modern art and science, so it should be largely exempt from the critiques that follow. And because this study has been limited to the western church, eastern Orthodoxy will not be considered.

In light of Bach’s music, the most concerning aspect of contemporary Christian music is not that it involves electric guitars, drum kits, or other newfangled instruments. Those critiques of CCM by Bach lovers do not hold water, in large part because Bach himself was extremely intrigued by the musical possibilities afforded by new instruments. Moreover, the problems do not even lie in the usage of popular melodies for sacred purposes. Even Bach used secular melodies in his sacred music. The most significant problem with CCM is its overreliance on consonant melody, and its ignorance of the theological opportunities afforded by polyphony – especially polyphony that incorporates dissonance into it.

“I strive for trying to write something that people can sing, that people want to sing, and that people need to sing,” says Chris Tomlin, one of the most successful CCM artists in the world. Tomlin has written dozens of simple, popular, and easily singable Christian songs, and his motivations seem every bit as noble as the founders of Gregorian chant or basic Lutheran hymns. From a theological perspective, such music is on sure footing, intended to inspire universal musical participation in worship. Moreover, Tomlin should be praised for writing new simple church music. Musical style and taste have changed significantly since the days of Gregorian chant and early Lutheran hymnody;

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many people who have grown up listening to twentieth and twenty-first century popular music also like church music in that style, and Tomlin has supplied it. What Tomlin and others like him have not supplied, however, is something beyond Scheibe’s own narrow aesthetic, in which music is most beautiful when it is easy, melodic, and superficially pleasant. Theologically, nothing is intrinsically wrong with this approach, and Bach even wrote galant music himself. But several aspects of music’s theological potential, which Bach already displayed hundreds of years ago, are unfortunately neglected. Here we will analyze three: a) the use of text painting as a means of illustrating Christ’s lordship over creation, b) the use of polyphony as an image of Christian peace, and c) the use of dissonance as a means of consoling suffering people.

Take, for example, one of Tomlin’s most popular songs, “Nobody Loves Me Like You.” The text focuses on Christ’s unique love, which can break even the mountainous weight that surrounds the singer. In an extremely popular YouTube video, Tomlin sings this text alone in the middle of a mountain range, visually suggesting the “weight” that Christ can break through. This is a fitting integration of text and moving image, but to someone accustomed to Bach’s own text painting (or text painting in general), something concerning stands out: nothing about the music itself suggests mountains or heaviness. Such musical depictions pervade Bach’s music, such as in the St. Matthew Passion, where Bach depicts the disciples ascending the Mount of Olives with an ascending bass line, or the heavy, wearied articulations of “zu schwer” when the bass soloist tries to carry Christ’s cross in “Komm, susses Kreuz.” In Bach, the listener does not just

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556 See, for example, 1.2.6.
experience Christ’s lordship over creation as a text to be read or an image to be seen; he or she can read, see, and feel it in the music itself.

Second, the reliance of CCM on consonant melody limits its ability to express Christian peace in musical sound. To be sure, not all of CCM is purely consonant and melodic. It occasionally involves some basic harmonies, and to that extent it can express tonal relations at peace with each other. Indeed, even St. Augustine repeatedly drew an analogy between the stable tonal relations of consonance and social peace, as we saw above. Yet obviously Augustine could not have been aware of Bach’s music, just as CCM writers obviously should not be ignorant of it. For in Bach, Christian peace is not a static musical reality, as if God could be pinned down in time to the sounding of a single major triad. No, Bach’s God is dynamic, with distinct voices that interpenetrate each other in time. In Bach, distinct voices can express themselves melodically while simultaneously harmonizing with other melodies. This is neither strict melody nor strict harmony; this is genuine polyphony, the sort of “divine counterpoint” that sends David Bentley Hart into rhetorical overdrive. Such polyphonic writing is, for example, the way Bach treats the word “Friede,” the “peace” that Jesus brings us in the penultimate movement of BWV 67. It begins as a rather straightforward fugue, with the alto, soprano and tenor voices entering on the same theme one after the other. Once the soprano part has finished its melodic line, though, a bit of Bach’s genius as a text painter emerges. On the words “zum Friede,” the soprano moves from a C-natural to a B and settles there for over a measure. During this time, the alto and tenor sing a brief duet, together climaxing on an A and F-sharp. The resulting chord – B, A, F-sharp – is harmonically rich, resisting

557 See 1.1.3.
easy categorization as either purely consonant or purely dissonant. This is not the static rest of pure consonance, nor the painful unrest of pure dissonance. It is, if we can bear the paradox, a form of peaceful tension – precisely the sort of peace available to a church still living in, as Luther put it, the “already but not yet” stage of salvation history. It is an image of the church moving peacefully through dissonance. Then, after this moment of peaceful tension, the alto moves from A to G-natural, creating a very brief moment of true dissonance with the F-sharp in the tenor. Yet as Hart claims, “dissonances are never final” in Bach, as the alto and tenor lines resolve to a perfect fourth (B-F-sharp again). Bach completes this textual passage with the soprano melodic line leading the other two into the next section. Without genuine polyphony, this vivid, dynamic sense of Christian peace is simply impossible to express in music.

Finally, and most importantly, CCM avoids dissonance in principle and therefore renders itself incapable of expressing the meaning of the crucifixion in music. Dissonance often disturbs people, and is almost always more difficult to sing or play than purely consonant music. Yet when a text addresses the pain and suffering of human beings and/or Christ, purely consonant music is not just terrible art; in that context, it is also terrible theology. For Christians run the risk of sentimentality when they willfully ignore the existence of pain and suffering in the world, and that is precisely what so much of CCM does musically. One might try to excuse the founders of Gregorian chant, on

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559 Hart, 283.
560 Here I am drawing heavily on the criteria Jeremy Begbie uses in his essay “Beauty, Sentimentality, and the Arts” in Treier, Husbands, Lundin, eds., The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 45-69: In Begbie’s words, the contemporary tie between beauty and sentimentality “is not a necessary one” (45). Indeed, the form of beauty present in Bach’s Passion oratorios is one that does not “misrepresent reality by evading or trivializing evil” (47), a mark of sentimentality.
historical grounds, for their lack of awareness of dissonance. Chris Tomlin and people like him, however, should certainly know better.

Take, for example, the textual and musical differences between the Bach aria “Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen” (BWV 56) and the extremely popular contemporary Christian song “Here I am to Worship,” which Tomlin has helped popularize. The two texts read as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen,
Er kömmt von Gottes lieber Hand,
Der führet mich nach meinen Plagen
Zu Gott, in das gelobte Land.
Da leg ich den Kummer auf einmal ins Grab,
Da wischt mir die Tränen mein Heiland selbst ab.
\end{verbatim}

Trans. Pamela Dellal.

\begin{verbatim}
Light of the world
You stepped down into darkness
Opened my eyes, let me see
Beauty that made this heart adore You
Hope of a life spent with You
Here I am to worship
Here I am to bow down
Here I am to say that You’re my God
\end{verbatim}

according to Begbie. Instead, the Passion oratorios recognize the reality of sin and dissonance, while transforming them artistically in light of the Christological drama unfolding. In a similar vein, Begbie also argues that the sentimentalist “fails to take appropriate costly action” (52); I am arguing that Bach encourages his listener to do so.

\begin{verbatim}
“I will gladly carry the Cross,
it comes from God’s dear hand,
and leads me, after my troubles,
to God, in the promised land.
There at last I will lay my sorrow in the grave,
there my Savior himself will wipe away my tears.”
\end{verbatim}

Trans. Pamela Dellal.
You’re altogether lovely
   Altogether worthy
   Altogether wonderful to me

   King of all days
   Oh so highly exalted
   Glorious in heaven above
   Humbly You came to the earth You created
   All for love’s sake became poor

Well, I’ll never know how much it cost
   To see my sin upon that cross.\textsuperscript{562}

These texts share several important characteristics: a focus on Christ’s redemptive action on the cross, an eschatological vision of what that crucifixion achieved, and a recognition that it cost Christ something. “Here I am to worship” even links themes central to this entire dissertation on Bach: the beauty of Christological light shining in darkness.

At least one critical difference separates the two texts, however. Bach’s text focuses relentlessly on what the crucifixion costs the singer (and presumably also the composer and listener), from the first line’s avowal \textit{in imitatio Christi}, to the troubles (\textit{Plagen}) that bar him from the Promised Land, to the tears (\textit{Tränen}) that require Christ’s washing. Christ will wash away the tears of believers, but the text gives the reader every expectation that the believing singer will do the same for others – he will bear the cross (\textit{den Kreuzstab tragen}) for others too. The text of “Here I am to worship,” however, only addresses the issue of human suffering obliquely with references to human darkness and Christ becoming poor. In that text, there is no sense of taking up one’s own cross and suffering with Christ, and the singer even claims that he or she will \textit{never know} how much the crucifixion cost. If intended only as a humble acknowledgment of the
difference between Christ’s infinite sacrifice and finite human powers, then such a claim
should not be criticized too stringently. However, it should also be recognized that such a
text limits, in principle, how much the believer can participate in Christ’s suffering.
Instead of focusing on how much more the believer can suffer like Christ (as in Bach’s
text), this CCM text runs the risk of inspiring spiritual idleness. Since I will never know
how much it cost Christ, one might imagine, why even try to find out?

Perhaps the singer will never know how much it cost Christ because the music
being sung contains no trace of dissonance. The consonant melody sung to “I’ll never
know how much it cost to see my sins upon the cross” could just as fittingly be sung to
any number of purely optimistic texts, such as “I’ve always known how much it cost to
see my sin upon the cross.” In fact, the latter text would sound far more fitting to its
purely consonant melody. There is no sense in the music itself that the singer will never
know how much Christ’s sacrifice cost. The music conveys no longing whatsoever. In
Bach’s aria, however, even the music itself makes the listener aware that something
costly is being addressed. A harsh minor-second dissonance is part of the thematic
substance of the entire piece (starting from the opening measures), and Bach uses this
dissonance to develop a range of new dissonances throughout the piece. Moreover, it is
worth pointing out that Bach takes great care to paint critical words in music: on
“tragen,” “to carry,” the melisma carries forward only to stumble and carry forward
again, and on “Plagen,” “troubles,” the melisma moves troublingly downward. No such
tone painting can be discerned in “Here I am to Worship” – only a generally pleasant,
appreciative mood.
Yet it is not the lack of dissonance itself that is most concerning about CCM; what such a lack suggests about the theology of CCM is. For any crucifixion music that does not include dissonance runs the risk of projecting something theological dangerous: sentimental longing for a pre-Edenic state, a “fiction of innocence,” as Jeremy Begbie puts it.\textsuperscript{563} Proper Christian longing, on the other hand, is for the New Jerusalem, in which pain and suffering are recognized but transformed by the beautiful light of Christ. The music of CCM typically presents a world without tears; the music of Bach presents a world in which tears have been transformed by the beautiful, healing light of Christ.

Bach himself was surely aware of such sentimental temptation, given how common these “fictions of innocence” were in the \textit{galant} era in which he lived. Andrew Talle even describes this in the terms of “nature”:

When commentators of the \textit{galant} era spoke of “nature,” they referred not to the world as it existed but rather to the world as it had been in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve’s fateful bite of the apple had not only condemned humans to lives of suffering but had also destroyed an immaculate physical environment. In that vanished world there had been no mountains, no lakes or oceans, no seasons, and no harsh winds, earthquakes, or other natural disasters. The earth had been egg-shaped and perfectly smooth. Animals had been tame, and human beings had lived to be nine hundred years old, drinking water instead of wine. Original sin had led God, generations later, to punish Earth’s inhabitants with the Great Flood. Rising waters had destroyed this perfect world and marooned humanity on islands of detritus. Bach’s contemporaries saw the mountains, valleys, and lakes that surrounded them not as welcome variations in an otherwise monotonous landscape but rather as unsightly scars on what had once been a perfect world. It was humanity’s obligation to somehow overcome God’s displeasure, in part by cultivating fleeting glimpses of this perfect world through art.\textsuperscript{564}

\textsuperscript{563} Begbie, 47.
Such a description bears much in common with the typical Lutheran presentation of pre-lapsarian Eden. Yet here Talle seems to be subsuming the differences between Scheibe and Birnbaum under the single banner of “commentators of the galant era.” Not all commentators of that era meant to refer to pre-lapsarian Eden when they used the term “nature” – thus Birnbaum’s response and the introduction of the idea of the “misshapenness” of nature, a term notably absent from Scheibe’s original critique. Talle actually seems aware of this striking disjunction, as he distinguishes Bach from his galant contemporaries:

The difficulty in Bach’s music stems from its extraordinary measure of counterpoint, which blurs the distinction between melody and accompaniment. The composer liked to maintain an uncomfortably high level of tension in his music and seldom offered relief in the form of boundary-defining changes in register, texture, or tone. It was for this reason that contemporaries grumbled about his works being unnecessarily difficult and better suited to pleasing eyes than ears—that is, more rewarding to analyze on the page than to hear in performance. A related problem, from the perspective of Bach’s contemporaries, was that his style was at odds with the prevailing aesthetic of his era, which celebrated lightness and ease. A majority of music lovers preferred repertoire that was more accessible—more galant, in the parlance of the time. The voice endemic to Bach’s music—presumably a reflection of the composer’s personality—speaks as if avoiding eye-contact, ruminating rather than declaiming, counseling rather than pontificating, probing rather than flattering. Though his works offer affirmation in the end, their profoundly deliberative character makes this affirmation feel hard-won.\(^{565}\)

Talle’s description here is accurate but incomplete. Bach’s music does often suggest a deliberative, ruminative, and probing artistic creator. But it also suggests precisely what Talle does not acknowledge: declamation, and especially declamation in the face of death. Rumination and declamation are not intrinsically opposed in Bach’s acts of artistic

\(^{565}\) Talle, 7.
creation; he ruminated over various musical possibilities, and when he found the right one, he declaimed it forcefully. Such is, I would contend, precisely the compositional methodology Dreyfus endorses in *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*. Are the melismas Bach wrote on the word “freue” of “Ich freue mich auf meinen Tod” ruminative? No, they are declamatory expressions made possible by prior rumination. Bach’s music is indeed “hard-won,” as Talle suggests, but the victory is not one of ruminative thought over declamatory action. The victory relevant to Bach is ultimately Christ’s victory over death, and Bach was so enamored with that victory that he would take up his own cross and suffer through the musical travails necessary (for example, long hours of rumination) to declaim Christ’s beautiful victory in music.

At the very heart of this dissertation is a claim that should be clear by now: beautiful art requires such sweat and struggle, and it was the sweating-and-struggling Master Artist who taught this to Bach through one of his most high-profile followers: Martin Luther. It was Luther who gave Bach his fundamental understanding of weighty concepts such as nature, art, and beauty, and Bach in turn gave the world some of the finest, most “hard-won,” musical art ever produced. Jeremy Begbie describes the interaction of these concepts well:

What Bach’s music provokes us to imagine, then, when set in its context, is a subtle relationship between natural and artistic beauty, where the two are not seen as fundamentally incompatible, but where natural beauty is the inhabited environment, trusted and respected, in which artistic beauty is born, even if born through sweat and struggle. The vision of making beauty is not one that sees the artist as striving for creation out of nothing, fashioning and foisting order where none is given, or pursuing a fetish for originality (the wholly underived act); still less is it one of the defiantly challenging God. But nor is it one in which we simply “let nature be,” merely follow its resonances and rhythms the way one might follow a river through a valley or the grain of a piece of wood. The vision is rather
of the artist, as physical and embodied, set in the midst of a God-given world vibrant with a dynamic beauty of its own, not simply “there” like a brute fact to be escaped or violently abused, but here as a gift from a God of overflowing beauty, a gift for us to interact with vigorously, form and (in the face of distortion) transform, and in this way fashion something as consistent and dazzlingly novel as the Goldberg Variations, art that can anticipate the beauty previewed and promised in Jesus Christ.  

5.5.1) Bach in Contemporary Culture

To close this chapter, I will now expand my focus from the contemporary academy and church to the position of Bach’s music in contemporary culture. In particular, I will suggest that Bach’s music presents a challenge to two modern claims about musical culture, which are operative in both the modern academy and church today: cultural relativism and cultural appropriation. First, cultural relativism is the term normally given to the claim that any particular culture can only be judged on the basis of its own cultural standards, and not by the standards of any other culture. Bach’s music presents a challenge to this claim because of its adherence to that which transcends all cultures: “nature,” or a created order that is invariant with respect to cultural activity, an order that is established by a God who himself is not captive to any particular culture. The harmonic series, for example, serves as a bridge across cultures, which enables both cross-cultural appreciation and cross-cultural criticism. Although different musical cultures employ different musical systems (such as tuning systems), the harmonic series is not dependent on those systems – quite the inverse, as we will see. Second, cultural appropriation names the activity of one cultural group using or “appropriating” the

cultural products of another group for the sake of the original group’s purposes. Such a concern, in cases of mockery or exploitation especially, is certainly understandable. But Bach’s music also shows that this concern itself can be dangerous, since it preemptively closes off the possibility of fruitful cross-cultural exchange between certain groups.

Before delving into the substance of these critiques, however, we must first examine Bach’s own approach to the issue of musical culture. If Bach himself were a cultural bigot, on what grounds could I claim that the beauty of his music has intercultural power?

Both before and after Bach’s time, national chauvinism was pervasive in German culture. Bach was born shortly after the conclusion of the Thirty Years War, one of the most destructive conflicts in European history, which more than decimated the German population at the time. Moreover, baroque German literature is littered with crass arguments for German musical superiority, and Bach’s earliest biographers extended this tradition by vaulting him to the status of a German national hero. One might understand if Bach were to succumb to such chauvinism and dabble in it himself.

As far as we can tell, however, Bach did precisely the opposite. As Christoph Wolff puts it, “any German chauvinism, such as that found even at this early date in the critical writings of Mattheson, Mizler, Scheibe, and others, seems to have been foreign to the Bachs.” He continues: “Johann Sebastian knew that his ancestor Veit had come from Hungary. So this man, boasted of by writers of his time (and by how many since!) as an ornament of German art not to be equaled by other nations, believed that he was descended from Hungarian stock.”

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567 NBR, 4.
becoming a German chauvinist, for Bach’s musical interests extended far beyond German-speaking lands, as Wolff explains:

Throughout his life Bach showed an insatiable interest in all kinds of music old and new, and of all nations. In his youth he traveled to hear the great musicians who were within what he considered walking distance—a radius of well over two hundred miles. So he heard Johann Adam Reincken, pupil of Jan Pieterszon Sweelinck, the great Netherlander who had made important contributions to the development of fugue composition and had passed along, to a host of organists, his knowledge of musical practice and theory—the latter based partly on Gioseffo Zarlino’s. For weeks Bach listened to the greatest northern musician of an older generation, Dietrich Buxtehude, who gave to organ playing an unheard-of majesty, splendor, and intensity, and who also excelled in the composition of church and chamber music. In his early years, too, he heard the court capelle of Celle and its cultivation of French music in an attempt to imitate the court of the kings at Versailles.568

Bach made such border-crossing musical study a consistent habit, studying the works of French musicians such as Lully and Couperin to Italian musicians such as Vivaldi and Scarlatti.569 But could Bach’s voracious appetite for new musical knowledge from different cultures really be indebted solely to his own ethnic ambiguity? After all, while his Hungarian ancestry may certainly have shielded him from forms of German chauvinism, it alone cannot explain Bach’s zeal for exploring music from all across Europe. After all, Bach was not obsessed with Hungarian music; he was obsessed with any music he could learn from, no matter what country it came from.

What explains Bach’s love of intercultural musical learning is that which stands above all musical cultures, a term at the very core of the Scheibe/Birnbaum debate: musical nature, music as a gift of God that depends on characteristics that are

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568 Ibid., 10.
569 Ibid., 10-12.
independent of human contrivance. Bach trusted that he could learn from other musical cultures not because he approved of everything in their musical cultures a priori; he trusted that he could learn from them because, among other things, he believed in the divinely implanted universality of musical nature. For Bach, musical nature exists as a bridge that connects disparate musical cultures, enabling mutual appreciation and criticism of what each culture has done with its shared raw natural material. And as out-of-fashion as a term such as “musical nature” may be in the late modern academy, some recent neurological research strongly suggests that its meaningfulness extends all the way to the physical structures of the human brain.

In his extraordinarily ambitious book The Master and His Emissary, the neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist has analyzed the role of the divided brain in the formation of the Western world.\(^570\) Bach’s music clearly fascinates him, since it elicits such a dynamic interaction between the right and left hemispheres of the brain:

> While we are gathering new information, the right hemisphere is responsible, but once whatever it is becomes thoroughly ‘known,’ familiar, it is taken over by the left hemisphere. The discovery that the contrapuntal music of J.S. Bach causes a strong right-hemisphere activation even in trained musicians is fascinating. It was explained by the researchers who made the finding on the basis that a range of melodic contours needs to be maintained in awareness simultaneously, requiring the right hemisphere’s greater capacity to hold experience in working memory. While that may be right, an alternative explanation might lie in the impossibility of attending to all parts of such music in its entirety, so that it can never be experienced in exactly the same way on different hearings. Because it is never finally captured, it is always new. And the two explanations are perhaps not so different, since the left hemisphere ‘capture’ that results in inauthenticity is possible only by limiting the scope of what is attended to.\(^571\)


\(^{571}\) McGilchrist, 75.
In other words, Bachian polyphony excites even trained musical brains because a single hearing of it cannot exhaust its beauty.\textsuperscript{572} This is a reality that even puzzled the otherwise fatalistic Nietzsche, as we saw above.\textsuperscript{573} And against Nietzsche’s postmodern disciples, McGilchrist presents evidence that musical beauty is not purely determined by culture. Because this issue is so critical to a proper understanding of Bach’s music in modern culture, it is worth quoting in full:

\begin{quote}
It may seem unjustifiable to speak of an intuitive sense of harmony, melody, or tonality, since these are now widely believed to be purely cultural determined, with an implication that they could be refashioned at will. But that is not the case at all. Music, of course, evolves, and what constitutes harmony, for example, has changed slowly over the course of time. The dominant seventh was considered a discord until the nineteenth century, and even the major third was once – in \textit{organum}, therefore until the fourteenth century – considered a discord. But generally there is intercultural understandability. Mongolian music, for example, does not sound harmonically incomprehensible, and certainly not unpleasant, to the Western ear. The acceptability and emotional meaning of music is not purely culture-bound. In fact it is almost universal. For example, Norwegians acculturated to a Western musical tradition make precisely the same associations between particular emotions and particular musical intervals as are made in Ancient Indian music – a radically different musical tradition. This would accord with most Westerners’ experience of Indian music, acknowledged as it is to be complex and based on different musical principles from our own.

Studies of adults from different cultures, and from different generations, studies in preverbal infants and even studies in animals and birds, show remarkable agreement in what is perceived as consonant and pleasurable,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{572} McGilchrist restricts his account to the philosophical plane alone, using neurological research to make claims about art and culture. However, in the theological terms of Bach’s milieu (and this dissertation), we might use McGilchrist’s argument to propose the idea that God created the human brain to be receptive to polyphonic music. Given the work of Lippius (and Hart, who makes the Trinity/harmonic triad connection explicit in Bach’s music), polyphony would then serve as a neurological linking point between human art and divinely created beauty in nature.

\textsuperscript{573} See 5.3.3.
and what is seen as dissonant and disagreeable. Specifically there are universal natural preferences at the physiological level for harmony over dissonance. Harmony causes changes in the autonomic nervous system, with a slowing of the heart. Dissonance activates areas of the brain associated with noxious stimuli, and harmony areas associated with pleasurable experience. Babies as young as four months old prefer consonance to dissonance, and infants already associate the minor key with sadness. In terms of the hemispheres, the right hemisphere is more sensitive to harmony, more involved in the processing of it, and more sensitive to the distinctions between consonance and dissonance. And there is a specific right hemisphere link with processing consonance, and a left hemisphere link with processing dissonance.

The appreciation of harmony is inherently complex. It is the last aspect of musicality to develop, beginning around the age of six, and reaching maturity only by puberty. Harmony in music is an analogue of perspective in painting. Each produces what is experienced as ‘depth’: each is right-hemisphere-dependent. They developed together at the same time in the Renaissance; and, similarly, they declined together with modernism, harmony becoming more precarious as painters such as Picasso started deliberately disorientating the viewer through manipulation of perspective.

Bach’s music is full of discords, and one would have to be musically deaf not to appreciate them – in both senses of the word ‘appreciate,’ because such moments are especially to be relished, as are the wonderful passing dissonances and ‘false relations’ in the music of, for example, Byrd and his contemporaries. But they are introduced to be resolved. The same elements that add relish to the dish makes it inedible if it comes to predominate. The passing discords so frequent in Bach are aufgehoben into the wider consonance as they move on and resolve. Context is once again absolutely critical – in fact nowhere can context be more important than in music, since music is pure context, even if the context is silence. Thus, in harmony as elsewhere, a relationship between expectation and delay in fulfillment is at the core of great art; the art is in getting the balance right, something with Bach consummately exemplifies.\(^{574}\)

Bach and Birnbaum could hardly have hoped for a better modern scientific defense of their position in their debate with Scheibe. McGilchrist’s description of music’s universal neurological basis fits very neatly into Luther’s theology of music: across time and place, human beings and non-human animals (especially birds) share an intuitive awareness of

\(^{574}\) McGilchrist, 418-420.
music’s natural characteristics, and can therefore sense the basic difference between consonance and dissonance.\footnote{In an article entitled “Bach Is the Father of Harmony: Revealed by a 1/f Fluctuation Analysis across Musical Genres,” a group of Chinese and Canadian scholars used fractal fluctuation analysis “to investigate whether the consonance fluctuation structure in music, with a wide range of composers and genres, followed the scale free pattern that has been found for pitch, melody, rhythm, human body movements, brain activity, natural images and geographical features.” They then “used a network graph approach to investigate which composers were the most influential both within and across genres. Our results showed that patterns of consonance in music did follow scale-free characteristics, suggesting that this feature is a universally evolved one in both music and the living world. Furthermore, our network analysis revealed that Bach’s harmony patterns were having the most influence on those used by other composers, followed closely by Mozart.” Such findings suggest a) that Luther and Bach were right to assume that harmony is a universal feature of music, a critical component of what they called “musical nature,” and that b) Bach can rightly be considered, on scientific grounds, one of the most important figures in the history of human harmony. D Wu, KM Kendrick, DJ Levitin, C Li, D Yao, “Bach Is the Father of Harmony: Revealed by a 1/f Fluctuation Analysis across Musical Genres,” \textit{PLoS ONE} 10, no. 11 (November 6, 2015). \url{https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0142431} (accessed October 9, 2020).} This universally applicable understanding of musical nature becomes particularly theological when McGilchrist echoes Birnbaum, whether intentionally or not: ‘Bach’s music is full of discords…’ he writes, ‘but they are introduced to be resolved.’ The theological implications here are enormous: what if God universally hardwired the human brain to crave the consonant resolution of dissonance? What if Bach’s music can still do what he intended it to do – namely, to offer his listeners a foretaste of heavenly beauty, where all earthly dissonances are \textit{aufgehoben} into the New Jerusalem, Christ’s own artistic masterpiece? Such beauty knows no cultural bounds; nor should it.

We are now in better position to understand the challenges Bach’s music presents to cultural relativism and cultural appropriation. As a guard against provincialism, cultural relativism serves an important purpose. It reminds us that no culture is perfect,
and that no culture holds a monopoly on the explanation of what a “good story” or “good music” is. In light of Bach’s music, however, a chief problem with cultural relativism is that so many people outside of Bach’s own culture have freely admired his musical excellence. One of the most celebrated conductors of Bach’s cantatas, for example, is the Japanese musician Masaaki Suzuki. In order for cultural relativism to explain Suzuki’s positive evaluation of Bach’s music, Suzuki would have to have had understood the internal cultural standards of German baroque music before embracing Bach’s music. Obviously this did not happen, and such an idea is absurd. There are, to be sure, cultural specifics that greatly aid in cross-cultural appreciation, and Suzuki certainly needed to learn more about German baroque culture in order to become the famous Bach conductor he is today. But – and this is crucial – he did not need to know any of that in order to fall in love with Bach’s music in the first place. He did not need to know German baroque culture in order for Bach’s music to make him want to know German baroque culture. He only needed to have what the overwhelmingly majority of human beings across all times and places have had: a functioning brain and pair of ears. Now, I am not suggesting that cross-cultural exchange is always peaceful, transparent or smooth; I am suggesting, however, that the borderlines between cultures are far more permeable than cultural relativism claims, and that critical evaluation across cultural borders is both possible and potentially beneficial.

Such fluidity of cross-cultural exchange has recently spawned a new cultural term, intended to name a problematic form of that exchange: one that we have mentioned above, cultural appropriation. In the last several decades, the idea of cultural appropriation has grown from a neologism in post-colonial studies to a dominant idea in
popular American and European political conversations. At its most neutral, this idea signals the use of one culture by someone who stands outside that culture. At its most critical, this idea signals something more sinister: someone standing outside (and usually “above”) one culture and benefitting from it (often by means of mocking it). Such is, for example, the use of blackface in minstrel shows in the American South. At its most beneficial, however, the idea of cultural appropriation signals something theologically powerful and absolutely essential to art of any kind: the appreciative and imaginative interplay of distinct cultures, even across differences in various forms of power. Thus the female author Marilynne Robinson can offer us the fictional male pastor John Ames, the painter Lucas Cranach (the younger) can invite his viewer to imagine being a

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576 According to Oxford Reference, “cultural appropriation” can be defined as “a term used to describe the taking over of creative or artistic forms, themes, or practices by one cultural group from another. It is in general used to describe Western appropriations of non-Western or non-white forms, and carries connotations of exploitation and dominance. The concept has come into literary and visual art criticism by analogy with the acquisition of artefacts (the Elgin marbles, Benin bronzes, Lakota war shirts, etc.) by Western museums. The term emerged during the last twenty years of the 20th cent. as part of the vocabulary of the post-colonial critique of Western expansionism. One early significant discussion was by Kenneth Coutts-Smith in ‘Some General Observations on the Concept of Cultural Colonialism’ (1976), where he brings together the Marxist notion of ‘class appropriation’ (the dominant class appropriating and defining ‘high culture’) and what he calls ‘cultural colonialism’, though he himself does not combine the two in the phrase ‘cultural appropriation’. The problem had been identified earlier in the century, though not in these terms, by the New Negro and Harlem Renaissance writers in the USA, who were concerned by the caricature of the African-American voice and folk traditions in minstrelsy shows and in such popular successes as J. C. Harris’s Brer Rabbit stories.” Oxford Reference, “Cultural Appropriation,” (2020).

medieval European at Christ’s crucifixion in ancient Jerusalem, and Masaaki Suzuki can perform and record extremely impressive renditions of Bach’s cantatas.

For the purposes of this dissertation, however, one of the most intriguing intersections between the music of Bach and the idea of cultural appropriation comes from a woman who made a major impact on American culture, and who was born only a few hundred miles from Duke University: Eunice Waymon, also known as Nina Simone.

The circumstances of Waymon’s birth thrust her right into the thick of the Jim Crow South. She grew up poor, black, and rural, so she was unfortunately a fairly typical child for her time, place, and skin color. What made her atypical was her extremely skillful singing and piano playing, which attracted the attention of her elders from an early age. They wanted to cultivate her talent, so they quickly helped her acquire piano lessons. Her most significant teacher, “Mrs. Massinovitch,” recognized her talent and took her straight to the heights of keyboard composition and performance. Simone recalls how Bach-heavy these lessons were:

At first her tuition frightened me because we only played Bach and he seemed so complicated and different that it took a while before I started to relax. Mrs. Massinovitch was very disciplined in the way she taught, very strict, even though everything she wanted me to do was phrased in the politest way possible. In those first lessons it seemed like the only thing

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578 In his Weimar Altarpiece (1555), Lucas Cranach (the younger) places Martin Luther, with Bible open, at the base of Christ’s cross.
579 Uwe Siemone-Netto, “J.S. Bach in Japan.”
580 Eunice Waymon (1933-2003) was a jazz musician and civil rights leader, who fell in love with Bach’s music as a youth and initially intended on becoming a classical pianist. She auditioned at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and was rejected, which she attributed to racial discrimination.
she said was, ‘You must do it this way, Eunice, Bach would like it this way, do it again!’ And so I would.  

The combination of Massinovitch’s discipline and Bach’s complexity made for challenging early lessons, but over time, Waymon began to understand what all the suffering was for:

As time went on I began to understand why Mrs. Massinovitch only allowed me to practise Bach and soon I loved him as much as she did. He is technically perfect. When you play Bach’s music you have to understand that he’s a mathematician and all the notes you play add up to something – they make sense. They always add up to climaxes, like ocean waves getting bigger and bigger until after a while when so many waves have gathered you have a great storm. Each note you play is connected to the next note, and every note has to be executed perfectly or the whole effect is lost. Once I understood Bach’s music I never wanted to be anything other than a concert pianist; Bach made me dedicate my life to music, and it was Mrs. Massinovitch who introduced me to his world. I had set out on a journey which became more wonderful and thrilling each week.

This early introduction to Bach even led Waymon in a mystical direction, such that she began to feel the presence of classical musicians in the room with her: “My mornings in that house were spent in the company of some of the greatest men that have ever lived,” she said, “and we talked about them and their music as if they were actually there with us and had just slipped out of the room for a moment.”  

Here Waymon sounds exactly like some modern white male European or North American, rhapsodizing about the grandeur of his favorite modern white male composer. But she was no such sort of person – she was a young African-American woman in the American South, and soon she would

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582 Ibid.
583 Ibid.
use her Bach-inspired musical abilities to challenge the status of her own people in her own place.

At some point in her early adulthood, Eunice Waymon became Nina Simone.\textsuperscript{584} This change in name accompanied a change in musical focus: from being rejected by the Curtis Institute of Music to being accepted as a musical civil rights leader. Her musical output shifted from “classical” to jazz, folk, rhythm and blues, gospel, and pop, and her popularity soared. Yet Simone did not frame this change in binary, “either/or” sorts of terms. In a way, it seems as though her early acquaintance with Bach expanded the horizon of what her music could communicate. Take, for example, her rendition of the Donaldson and Kahn song “Love me or Leave me,” which she performed at various points during her career. In what we might call its “A-section,” we hear a rather typical jazz opening with solo vocal expression accompanied by piano and percussion. After the first chorus, however, Simone upsets expectations and inserts a Bachian fugue. The percussion remains, but the singing drops out. The listener’s focus now is entirely on Simone’s intense piano playing, wherein a theme from the A-section is developed fugally. Simone regularly improvised these “B-sections,” just as Bach would have been likely to do himself. The A-section then returns, now enriched harmonically by the “B-section” that Bach helped Simone create.

The influence of Bach on Simone is apparent throughout aspects of her musical oeuvre, and it should prompt us to ask: is there a connection between Simone’s early

\textsuperscript{584} For further detail on her musical upbringing and its impact on her later musical work, see: Ruth Feldstein, “I Don’t Trust You Anymore”: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s,” \textit{The Journal of American History} 91, no. 4 (March 2005):1349-1379.
exposure to Bach and her passionate commitment to racial justice? Is it possible that as a child, Bach’s music gave her a foretaste of Christ’s peace and his redemption of the cosmos, and she then spent the rest of her life trying to write music that would help others taste that redemption? Did Bach’s music make her crave the resolution of all dissonances, including racial ones? A full answer would require an entire chapter or dissertation in itself, but such a connection should be intriguing to anyone who cares about the intersection of theological aesthetics and ethics.

At this point, one might argue that Simone’s use of Bachian fugue is not an example of “cultural appropriation” because she represents a marginalized culture borrowing from a dominant one. Anyone making such a claim faces the difficult task of explaining how the music of an eighteenth-century German reflects the dominance of British colonialism in the twentieth-century American South, but for the sake of argument and further illustration, let us look at a more straightforward example of the potential dangers of “cultural appropriation” in Bach’s music: white Americans mixing Bach with some of the most iconic black American music.

In a video with more than seven million views at the time of this writing, a musical group called “The Piano Guys” plays a mash-up of the Jackson Five song “I Want You Back” and a variety of Bach pieces. They call it, of course, “I Want You Bach.” The video begins with a harpsichordist and cellist, clad in baroque attire, who emerge from a cloud of fog when a question appears on the screen: “What if the 1770s

This baroque duo then follows up with a bit of Bach, played in an atmosphere of polite erudition. At their first cadence, an electric guitar then starts playing out of nowhere, a floating stage lowers from the ceiling, and the whole atmosphere shifts from baroque to funk. The baroque duo seems startled by this brazen interruption, but the new duo, obliviously jamming out in funk heaven, seems not even to notice its baroque competitors underneath. The baroque duo feverishly tries to reassert its musical authority, and it seems as though the advertised “cultural collision” is about to ensue.

Even at this point, some would already interpret this video as yet another exercise in white Europeans co-opting black culture and profiting from it. This video, according to such an interpretation, is cultural appropriation at its worst. “The Piano Guys” are not honoring “The Jackson Five” with this video; they’re rendering it acceptable to white European aesthetic ideals by framing it within the context of the work of one of the greatest white European aesthetes. The “The Piano Guys” are really saying, whether intentionally or not, that black American music is only good when it can be “Bachified.” This “capture” of an artistic product from a marginalized community is not a cute idea or innocent dance music; it is a re-performance of European colonialism hundreds of years after Christopher Columbus. Can white Americans not just enjoy the Jackson Five’s music on its own terms and keep their slavery-stained hands off of it?

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586 Apparently the date of Bach’s death (1750) was not especially important to the inter-temporal question that “The Piano Guys” wanted to raise. Given their twenty-first century audience, one can understand why they would choose to adhere to “The Jackson Five”’s 1970s timeframe rather than Bach’s pre-1750 timeframe. “The Jackson Five” did not even exist in the pre-1950 timeframe.
Yet as the video progresses, it becomes clear that “The Piano Guys” are trying to operate by a different sort of cultural logic. The “cultural collision” we expect never happens. Sometimes Bach takes the lead, sometimes the Jackson Five takes the lead, and sometimes – at peak harmonic expression – the two musical textures coincide simultaneously. The aesthetic effect is musical fusion, precisely the opposite of collision. In some ways, Bach sounds enriched when “funk-ified” and in other ways, “The Jackson Five” sounds enriched with baroque ornamentation. The final product is something that neither Bach nor “The Jackson Five” could have produced on their own, yet it also seems extremely plausible that both Bach and “The Jackson Five” would enjoy it greatly – not to mention the millions of people who obviously already have.

Like Nina Simone, what “The Piano Guys” have done is displayed hidden affinities between two cultural products that are otherwise separated by hundreds of years and thousands of miles. Their work is a testament to that which transcends individual cultures – nature – and the ability of the harmonic series (among other objective realities, such as the numerical basis of rhythm) to serve as a conciliatory bridge between those cultures, even cultures with vastly unequal power and histories of unjust violence committed against each other. Perhaps some postmodern people are so committed to an all-encompassing hermeneutic of suspicion that even “The Piano Guys” cannot escape their wrath. Perhaps some will still consider them, on the basis of their skin color, subconscious racists unwittingly co-opting black music for white gain. There may always be such people who either cannot or will not distinguish between manipulative and non-
manipulative social relations, as Alasdair MacIntyre put it, and some people may refuse to accept the possibility of cultural reconciliation in any form. But it is also possible that the intercultural beauty of artistic works such as “I Want You Bach” and Simone’s “Love Me or Leave Me” can break through the hardened cynicism of postmodern culture, and allow people to hear something more peaceful and beautiful than they ever expected.

In a recent video from his official YouTube channel, the celebrated Franco-Chinese-American cellist Yo-Yo Ma has performed, and perhaps synthesized, much of what I have just been promoting. The video begins with words from Ma himself: “Culture – the way we express ourselves and understand each other – can bind us together as one world.” Then, across an image of the Empire State Building in New York City, the musical effects begin. A stream of flowing white ribbon stretches across the screen, and moves in tandem with the music that Ma has just begun: the prelude to Bach’s first Cello Suite. As Ma continues playing, and the white ribbon stretches further into time and place, we begin to see what the music intends to envelop: people of various ages, races, genders, nationalities, and abilities, who are all dancing, playing, singing, or otherwise being involved in some sort of cultural activity. Ma plays the final chord, the images fade away, and the video ends with a fitting hashtag: #cultureconnectsus.

Culture can connect us, but what enables that cross-cultural connection is that which all cultures share in common: the universal in-built structures of God’s creation, or

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what we (following Bach and Luther) have been calling “musical nature.” Indeed, the prelude to Bach’s first Cello Suite exemplifies Bach’s approach to musical nature extremely well; in it, we hear Birnbaum’s description of the work of a proper musical artist: the “alternation and connection of consonances and dissonances,” and a composer who knows “how to introduce dissonances and resolve them skillfully.” The piece opens with a series of arpeggiated chords in G-Major, thus establishing it as the “home key,” or the “tonic.”

Around measure six, however, Bach begins to move “away” from this tonic home key, and begins to drift into the “dominant,” D-Major. He then drifts even further away from G-Major, introducing a variety of dissonances that ultimately result in an ascending chromatic scale in D-Major. With every new chromatic interval, the listener can increasingly feel a sense of tense expectation, a sense that the dissonances involved are ungestalt, and therefore crave the beautiful resolution of G-Major. Accordingly, the final chromatic note (F#) gives way to an ecstatic return “home” to G, now two octaves above the original G, and the cellist celebrates the beauty of consonant victory over dissonance. In the context of the dissonances Bach introduces in and around D-Major, the consonant light of G-Major shines even brighter. The beauty of Christ’s cosmic redemption has therefore become more audible, and all human beings should sing, play, and dance accordingly.

589 For this description, I am indebted to Alisa Weilerstein in the following video: Vox, “That famous cello prelude, deconstructed.”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1ge2mYdTtM (accessed October 9, 2020).

590 In the context of the claims of this dissertation, wherein the consonant resolution of dissonance reflects and offers a foretaste of Christ’s redemption of the fallen cosmos, this ecstatic exclamation of “G” two octaves above the original “G” can be seen as a kind of “recapitulation,” as in the maturation anthropology of Irenaeus of Lyons. The “G” of Revelation 21 resounds much higher than the “G” of Genesis 1.
5.6.1) Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has primarily been to show, using the findings of the first four chapters, that neither the contemporary academy nor the contemporary church offers an entirely hospitable locale for Bach studies. What we found in the first four chapters is that Bach was a sophisticated Lutheran theologian who greatly enhanced the tradition of Lutheran theological aesthetics through music. In this chapter, I have attempted to show that the increasing bifurcation of the contemporary academy and church has made understanding Bach’s music difficult for participants in both arenas. As a theological musician or musical theologian, Bach’s music would naturally reside in churches with serious musicological commitments, or universities with a serious commitment both to theology and the church. But it may also be the case that outside the bifurcated contemporary academy and church, modern culture is capable of carrying Bach’s integrated project forward. Perhaps both the contemporary academy and church need to pay closer attention to the work of musicians like Nina Simone, “The Piano Guys,” and Yo-Yo Ma.

So in closing, and considering that this dissertation is part of a doctoral degree in theology, let us return to the question that originally animated this chapter: what sort of theologian was Bach? Irwin offers her own proposal: “The story of Bach as a conservative Lutheran with his finger in the dike to hold back the flood of new musical ideas and styles is as much a legend as that of the little Dutch boy.”\(^{591}\) Here Irwin is only

\(^{591}\) Irwin, *Neither Voice nor Heart Alone*, 152. As late as 2011, Irwin was still bifurcating the identities of “musician” and “theologian” in reference to Bach. “I think Bach, Buttstedt, and Mattheson would all prefer to be labeled musicians rather than
half correct. Bach certainly did not have ‘his finger in the dike to hold back the flood of new musical ideas and styles.’ In fact, Bach was one of the great promoters of those new musical ideas and styles, and often in ways that eluded the understanding of his contemporaries. Yet Irwin is patently wrong if she means to insinuate that Bach was not a conservative Lutheran. Bach certainly was a conservative Lutheran, and because he was a conservative Lutheran, he was a musical innovator. Bach was fiercely loyal to Luther, for in Luther he found the theological grounding for an expansive new musical program – one that embraced new discoveries in musical nature and in musical cultures across Europe. Ultimately, Bach’s music would make the beauty of Christ’s cosmic redemption more audible to all of his listeners, whether in eighteenth-century Leipzig, Germany, twenty-first-century Durham, North Carolina, or any of the times and places in between.

So Bach did, indeed, have his finger in a dike. He wanted to stop the flow of new philosophical and theological ideas that threatened to supplant or even extinguish Luther’s theology of music. His instrument of choice, however, was rather unconventional. Yes, Bach would sometimes resort to rational argumentation when he felt that his own office was being attacked, and adversaries such as Ernesti and Scheibe felt the brunt of such critique. But such arguments were undoubtedly a tedious distraction from the form of rhetoric Bach was most interested in: music itself. Bach evidently thought that music was best suited to plug the Enlightenment holes he saw all around theologians,” she writes (83). Having now shown that Bach was a sophisticated interpreter of Lutheran aesthetics, I must say that such a bifurcation seems unhelpful. Even if Bach was not an institutionally trained theologian, he certainly trained himself in theological matters (or, better put, allowed Luther and other Lutheran theologians to train him through their writings). The most helpful approach to Bach studies is to assume he was both a theologian and a musician, and that his artistic work bears the markers of both identities. Irwin, “The Orthodox Lutheranism of Mattheson and Bach,” Bach 42, no. 1 (2011): 70–83.
him, and what flowed forth from his hand remains the most beautiful Christian music ever written.
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