

# The Music of the Cross: Unveiling Rhetorical Devices in J. S. Bach's Large-Scale Sacred Works

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## Abstract

The Germanic Lutheran tradition of music composition is known for its consistent use of rhetorical devices. In instrumental works, they rely on common codes between the composer and the listener; in vocal works, they enhance the meanings of the text so as to present it in a compelling fashion. This poster explores some of the rhetorical devices, symbols, and other semiotic artifices used in connection with the “cross” and other correlated concepts. In exploring J. S. Bach's large-scale vocal works (especially the B Minor Mass and the passions), it explores their rendition of the Messianic crucifixion. The poster uses a mixed music-theoretical and musicological approach and focuses on providing visual examples of the analysis.

## Musica Poetica

In German baroque musical thought, the concept of the affections, or *musica poetica*, consists of various *Figurenlehren* (rhetorical-music figures) and the context that allows them to have meaningful, comprehensible affects. The mechanisms of rhetoric in music and *musica poetica* are found in ancient Greek education and theories of Boethius. Classical rhetoric, as taught in the *trivium*, and the concept of music of the spheres point to this tradition.

*Musica poetica*, as the name suggests, is a connection that theorists drew between oratory and music or, more specifically, the rhetorical potential inherent in music. Theorists likened musical compositions to speech in terms of structure and their shared goal of convincing and moving the listener to a particular understanding, emotion, or devotion. The goal of *musica poetica* was achieved through various *Figurenlehren*, tone painting, and the mode of the piece.

In the Lutheran tradition, the development of *musica poetica* is of a more complex and intricate nature. In this particular historical context, music-rhetorical figures entail more than just the direct enhancement of the text afforded by overt tone-painting. They count on a vast array of devices that serve as signifiers that denote precise and specific extra-musical meanings—thus acting as common codes between the composer and the audience.

Since the usage of these figures were part of a centennial Lutheran tradition by the time Bach was active as a composer, their meanings were easily identifiable to that hermetic audience. Bach also uses unique symbolism in his oeuvre, with particular attention to the theological themes of the “cross” and “crucifixion”; both are emphasized consistently in his vocal works.

## Examples

The following examples, taken from the St. Matthew Passion BWV244 (1727) and the Latin Mass in B Minor BWV 232 (1749)—two of Bach's large-scale vocal works—show some of Bach's rhetorical treatment of the cross.

St. Matthew's Passion, BWV 244 (1727)



Figure 1. “Gerne will ich mich bequemen, Kreuz und Becher anzunehmen” (No. 23). Cross figure.



Figure 2. “Laß ihn kreuzigen!” (No. 45b and 50b). Cross figure (inverted).



Figure 3. “Ja, freilich will in uns das Fleisch und Blut zum Kreuz gezwungen sein” (No. 56). Dissonance; minor second.

B Minor Mass, BWV 232 (1749)



Figure 4. “Crucifixus”. Lamenting bass figure.



Figure 5. “Kyrie”. Sighing figure.

## Numerical Symbolism

Theorists have also explored numerical significance in the works of J.S. Bach and, while some proposals may be speculative in nature, Bach's deliberate and meticulous compositional practices suggest these instances are not accidental. For example, Bach altered the “Credo” of the B-Minor Mass, dividing it into nine movements instead of the original eight. He positioned the “Crucifixus” as the fifth movement and, hence, the centerpiece in this section of the Latin Mass. This is significant as five is traditionally understood as the symbol of the cross, represented by its five points and the five “wounds of the cross”—Christ's hands, feet, and side. Also significant is the total measure count in the “Crucifixus”, which was originally designed to contain forty-nine measures. Bach instead deliberately extends the movement to contain fifty-three measures. This can be seen as a reference to Isaiah 53, a passage directly associated with the crucifixion.

## Conclusion

Composers of instrumental and vocal works in the German Lutheran tradition communicated with their audiences through combinations of rhetorical-music figures, tone-painting, and the overall affection portrayed. The *Figurenlehren* used in compositions communicated sighing, mourning, exultation, and more to audiences, thereby enhancing the general and overarching affection of the piece. Thus, these figures rhetorically enhanced text in vocal works and communicated specific, profound beliefs in instrumental works. J.S. Bach used music-rhetorical figures extensively with purpose and precision in his compositions. The understood figures are also accompanied by deliberate symbolism in numerical form, which is less obvious to the listener but, nonetheless, worth exploring from a theoretical standpoint. These figures and symbols enhance and communicate theological themes, especially the topics of the “cross” and “crucifixion”.

## References

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