

## Introduction:

Over the course of a violist da gamba's life, he or she will almost invariably be asked to participate in a performance of one of Bach's Passions, or of cantata 106 or the sixth Brandenburg Concerto. In our private studies, the Bach Sonatas (BWV 1027-1029) are *de rigueur*. We all have to learn them. Yet something has always bothered me about Bach's works for viol. Of all the pieces, only "Komm süßes Kreuz" from the *St. Matthew Passion* even begins to approach what we might recognize as idiomatic viol writing. Having also played finger-twisting continuo lines for a number of Bach's arias that were never intended for viol, I have been dismayed to find that the viol-specific works feel no more idiomatic or viol-like than these. It is as if he could have used any instrument at all.

This question, then, comes to mind: "Why did Bach bother?" This question seems especially relevant to the larger works that include viol parts; specifically the cantatas and the Passions. If he could have used any instrument at all for a given part, why did he choose the viol over one that, among other things, could probably be better heard in a large hall? The purpose of this paper is to try to begin to answer these questions.

The inspiration for the pursuit of this topic originated with the liner notes included in Philip Pickett's recent recording of the Brandenburg Concertos (L'Oiseau-Lyre D 206896).<sup>1</sup> In these notes, Mr. Pickett puts forth a decidedly

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Pickett, liner notes to Johann Sebastian Bach, *Brandenburg Concertos*, New London Consort Philip Pickett, L'Oiseau-Lyre D 206896.

extra-musical analysis of each concerto, and of the six concertos as a group. Each concerto, he asserts, is an allegory, with each instrument and group of instruments is, in effect, playing character roles. If there is truly a basis for this idea (unfortunately Mr. Pickett's arguments, though very detailed, are not supported by any citations; a problem that will be dealt with subsequently), then perhaps the key to Bach's decision to use a viol for a given part is rooted in the idea of the viol as a symbol, rather than simply an available instrument or desired timbre.

Although there is some support for this idea, in the available literature on this topic none of the four authors I found who actually state outright that the viol is symbolic of or an allegory for something, not one of them makes any attempt to reinforce their statement. Therefore, other semiotic and exegetical approaches must be employed to try to get at the possible meanings of Bach's use of the viol.

After a brief discussion of the adoption and development of the viol in Germany, I will focus on the viol as symbol by examining the few references to the viol as such in the works of current musicologists and performers. I will then compare these statements to what is actually depicted in a number of representations of the viol in visual art, especially those from Germany and the Netherlands. An idea will emerge of what Bach or a member of Bach's audience might have associated with "viola da gamba." Lastly, I will focus on analyses of the viola da gamba parts in Bach's cantatas and Passions; specifically Cantatas

106 and 198, as well as both the St. Matthew and St. John Passions. The analysis will focus on similarities in the context of the viol parts, i.e. text, form, affect, and instrumentation, in order to determine how the viol is cast consistently from cantata to cantata for a specific type of role. Once this consistency is determined, some comparisons will then be made to the above-mentioned statements in the available literature. The final section will then draw conclusions regarding the idea of instrumental symbolism and allegory in Bach's music, specifically as it pertains to the role of the viola da gamba.

#### Section I: The Viola da Gamba in Germany and its Symbolism in Art.

After its early beginnings in Spain, followed by its aristocratic development in Italy, Germany was the first part of Europe north of the Alps to adopt the viol. Though it had developed its own consort repertoire in Germany during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after 1600 it would appear that viol consort stylings from England and elsewhere were what became most popular.<sup>2</sup> English players such as Daniel Norcombe were employed in the Netherlands, and German consort collections published between 1607 and 1677 were mostly made up of works by English composers such as John Dowland, Anthony Holborne, and William Brade. Collections of dance suites were published by Shein and David Funck.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the seventeenth century, viol consort music was no longer popular in Germany. A rich and varied virtuoso tradition, however, by this time

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<sup>2</sup> Woodfield and Robinson, "Viol," 805.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

was in full bloom in the many small courts, especially in northern Germany and the Low Countries. Many works for solo viol with accompaniment were composed by August Kühnel, Johann Schenck, Konrad Höffler, and others. The viol was widely used as an obbligato instrument in sacred works by Theile, Buxtehude, and, of course, Bach. Regarding the style of this music as compared to other parts of Europe, Woodfield and Robinson state the following:

“It was not until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the bass viol was developed as a solo instrument in Germany and the Low Countries. With the exception of the north German and Flemish school of viol players (whose style of writing was influenced by the French virtuosos), German composers generally chose to write single melodic lines for the viol, exploiting its individual tone-colour (sic), but not the chords and wide leaps that the French considered an essential characteristic of good viol writing.”<sup>4</sup>

By the second half of the eighteenth century, the viol had all but disappeared in Germany, as it had in much of the rest of Europe. Cöthen-born Bach affiliate Karl Friedrich Abel was one of the last great viol virtuosi. He spent the second half of his 65 years in London, and died in 1787. Though there may be social and political reasons underlying the demise of the viola da gamba, the primary reason for its fall from favor is that it simply could not compete with the volume the violin family was able to produce. As concerts moved more and more from the close confines of the aristocratic chamber to the larger public concert halls, instruments that could project to the back of the large rooms gained

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

in importance, leaving instruments designed for a more intimate environment far behind.<sup>5</sup>

It was stated in the introduction to this article that of all the materials consulted during research, only a very few authors made any mention of what the viol might symbolize in music of the German Baroque. In his book *Bach's Continuo Group: Players and Practices in His Vocal Works*, Laurence Dreyfus states that the viol represented “royalty,” the “remote realm of the pastoral,” the “grief of mourning,” or the “heroic dream of victory over evil.”<sup>6</sup> In his lengthy liner notes for his 1993 recording of the Brandenburg Concertos, Philip Pickett goes on at length about each instrument in each of the concertos, and its symbolism and allegorical meaning.<sup>7</sup> In their article in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Ian Woodfield and Lucy Robinson state, “In (cantatas 106 and 198), both concerned with death, the symbolic significance of the viol as an instrument representing joy in death is particularly evident in those arias with viol obbligatos.”<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, in all three of these instances, nothing further is said on the subject, and no notes as to where these ideas came from is given.

That art and music are rife with symbolism and allegory in the Baroque is not in question here. Rhetorical figures, emblems, and symbols abound in all the arts from this period. There is ample evidence that instruments themselves could be, and frequently were, symbols themselves. Michael Marissen's studies

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<sup>5</sup> Hubert Le Blanc, “Defense de la viole,” trans. By Barbara Garvey Jackson, *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America*, v. 10, December 1973, 11-28.

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach's Continuo Group: Players and Practices in His Vocal Works*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987) 166-169.



Fig. 1: Nicolas and Robert Bonnart, *Habit de ville; Le Sanguin*. Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos show time and again how instruments could symbolize various things. In his work on the first Brandenburg Concerto, he makes a very strong argument for aristocratic symbolism of the horns in the first movement through their association with the

mounted hunt:

"Beyond the strong associations with aristocracy and the outdoor life of the privileged classes, the hunt also embodied contemporary moral and philosophical

principles.... The hunt was emblematic of *Tugend* (worldly virtue; a complex mixture of bravery, industry, honesty, and chivalry), signifying a new manifestation of the older *ritterlich-höfisch* (chivalrous-courtly) ideals central to aristocratic thought. Owing to its ceremonial and signal functions in the hunt, the horn emerged as an allegorical figure representing aristocratic values. The sound of the horn was therefore able to excite deep feelings in the aristocracy, in whose minds it symbolized the very essence of nobility."<sup>9</sup>

Marissen then combines this symbol with other symbols embedded in the structure of the piece and the interactions of the various instrument groups as characters. Through this method, he is able to realize an allegorical interpretation of this entire movement:

<sup>7</sup> Pickett

<sup>8</sup> Woodfield and Robinson, 805.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Marissen, *The Social and Religious Designs of J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 22-23.

“Although these procedures might be attributed wholly to Bach’s musical ingenuity or rational inclination, it is difficult to ignore their social implications. Just as the episodes only gradually gain a formal “identity” by becoming less dependent on the ritornello, the horns lose their social “identity” by becoming gradually assimilated into the more neutral instrumental style of the rest of the ensemble. That is, the string and oboe choirs are not contrasted by “violinistic” or “oboistic” treatment; instead both choirs play counterpoint that is not instrument specific. And the horns reach their greatest prominence contrapuntally only when, at the end of the process, they adopt a style utterly unidiomatic to the instrument.”<sup>10</sup>

Though there is no direct reference to Marissen’s work, Philip Pickett seems to take these ideas a step or two further, applying this style of analysis to all six of the Brandenburg Concertos.<sup>11</sup> After establishing his theory of the concertos as a set being a sort of allegorical “procession of tableaux” written not only to be performed but to be contemplated by the Margrave Christian Ludwig for whom they were written, Pickett discusses the importance of rhetoric, *Trauerspiel* or allegorical drama, *Vanitas* as exemplified in the *Memento mori* paintings of the Netherlands, and the importance of classical allusions in court spectacle. As for the “tableau” of the sixth Brandenburg Concerto, which is of particular interest to this project because of its instrumentation, Pickett has this to say:

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Marissen, “Concerto Styles and Signification in Bach’s First Brandenburg Concerto, *Bach Perspectives* v. 1, Russell Stinson, ed., (Lincoln, NB and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 90-91.

<sup>11</sup> Pickett, Liner Notes.

*"The Meeting of the Three Quick and the Three Dead:* Here the lack of violins leads to an overall low pitch and somber sonority, both traditionally associated with death. The presence of viols confirms the symbolism, and their repeated quavers represent the relentless passing of time – clocks are an omnipresent reminder of earthly transience in *Vanitas* paintings, and the same repeated quavers appear in Biber's *Requiem* and Bach's own *Actus Tragicus*. ...I cannot help but see parallels between the work and 'The Meeting of the Three Quick and the Three Dead', a popular theme in literary and visual sources of the seventeenth century. Three young Princes (two violas and cello), returning carefree from the chase, meet three cadavers (two viols and violone). The death figures warn the Princes to repent, for wealth and beauty vanish – all must eventually succumb to death."<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with Mr. Pickett's interpretation, it appears that he may, in fact, be on to something. The reference that Mr. Pickett makes to *Vanitas* paintings and a musical representation of a popular allegorical story seem to fit the general mindset of the Baroque.<sup>13</sup> The problem, as it concerns this paper, is, however, the character represented by the viols. This idea of the viols representing death is rather striking, and deserves further investigation.

In order to begin to understand what the viol might represent in the music of Bach, a survey of paintings from and before Bach's time



Fig. 2: Portrait of Watteau and Jullienne, engraved by N. H. Tardieu. Collection of Professor Alan Curtis, Berkeley, California.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> For further general information on *Vanitas* and the use of allegory, tableaux, and rhetoric in art, see John Rupert Martin, *Baroque*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).





Fig. 3: Vermeer, *Lady Seated at a Virginal*, The National Gallery, London.

that contain depictions of viols can be very useful. Though most authors that have written on instruments in art tend to focus mainly on what scholars may learn about a given instrument's development, construction, or playing technique, there are occasionally references to what various instruments signify

in certain contexts. In other cases, by looking at the context in which an instrument occurs

in a painting, and comparing it with other depictions, one may begin to discern a pattern, a certain consistency in the contexts, and thereby draw conclusions about an instrument's cultural association, and possible allegorical meanings.

In her brief article in 1974 edition of the *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America*, Mary Cyr paintings by various artists that include or focus on the viola da gamba.<sup>14</sup> These paintings, though mostly French, include Vermeer, from Holland (see fig. 3), and the Italian Zampieri (see fig. 4). The French are represented by an engraving by Tardieu (see fig. 4), and paintings by Metsu (see fig. 5), Garnier (see fig. 6), and a sketch by Portrail (see fig. 7). In the



Fig. 4: Domenico Zampieri, *Sainte Cécile*, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Cyr, "The viol in Baroque Paintings and Drawings," *The Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America*, vol. 11, 1974, 4-16.



Fig. 5: Gabriel Metsu, *Lady Playing the Viola da Gamba*, De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco.

Garnier, which is clearly an allegory, the viol represents Louis XIV's musical achievements, according to Cyr. The Anonymous *Instruments de musique* has been attributed to J. B. Oudry (1686-1755). He is known to have chosen musical instruments as still-life subjects "for their beauty rather than for a symbolic intent (see fig. 8)."<sup>15</sup> With this in mind, it can be seen that all these paintings, except for this one, have one thing in common: they all portray the viol in a scene involving aristocratic subjects, be they an

allegory for the king, a portrait of an artist and his aristocratic patron, a court musician, or some obviously well-to-do ladies. This is not unusual. In nearly all the paintings from the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries studied for this project, none contained pictures of the viol in any setting less than courtly. Nor was any such setting mentioned in the one book so far considered among the most important on the subject, Emanuel Winternitz's *Musical Instruments and Their*



Fig. 6: Jean Garnier, *Allégorie en l'honneur de Louis XIV*, Musée de Versailles.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

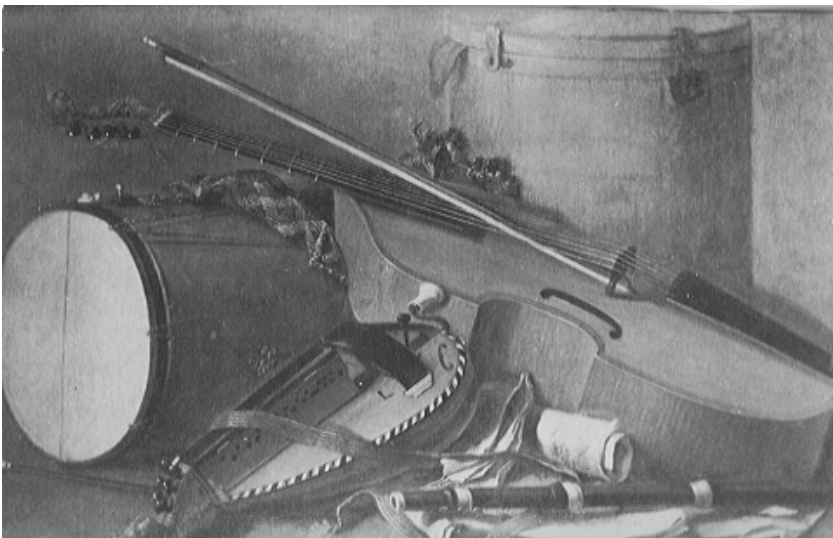


Fig. 7: Jacques-André Portail, *Viola da Gamba Player*, Print room, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

*Symbolism in Western Art*.<sup>16</sup> In fact, these painting do all the more to support the idea that the viola da gamba, at the time of Bach, was still, as it had been since it's arrival in Italy in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, an instrument associated with the courts, and enjoyed by wealthy amateurs.<sup>17</sup>

So what of the death symbolism? To find such symbols in painting, the first place one might look is among the *Vanitas* paintings of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch artists. A number of these are contained in Winternitz's book, as well François Lesure's *Music and Art in Society*. Often in *Memento Mori* paintings, a musical instrument

will be present to signify yet another worldly pleasure that will be lost as one, inevitably, dies. The



viol, however, is generally not one of these instruments.

The violin dominates

Fig. 8: Anon., *Instruments de musique*, Musée de Blois.

<sup>16</sup> Emanuel Winternitz, *Musical Instruments and Their Symbolism in Western Art: Studies in Musical Iconology*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

<sup>17</sup> Pieter Fischer, *Music in Paintings of the Low Countries in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1975), 78.

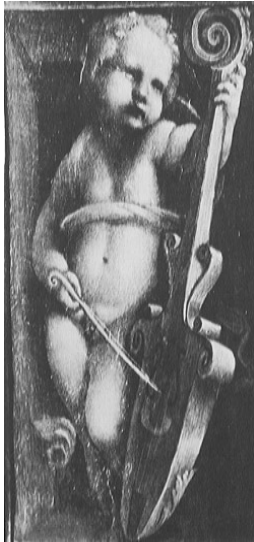


Fig. 9: Bernardino Lanini, detail of *Sacra conversazione*, Raleigh Museum, Raleigh, North Carolina

as the representative of music in this genre. In fact, at no time during the research for this project was a painting found that associated the viol with death, or with any particularly dark subject.

The viol did, however, appear with some degree of regularity, in depictions of the divine. Throughout fifteenth

and sixteenth-century Italian and, to some extent, German religious painting, angels and putti are frequently depicted playing, among other instruments, viols, or instruments that appear to be related to viols (see figs. 9-11). Mary Cyr includes a well known (among viol players, anyway) painting of St. Cecilia, patron saint of music (see fig. 6), in which she is playing and possibly singing with a seven-string viol (the earliest known depiction of a viol with this many strings).<sup>18</sup> The viol can also be counted among the



Fig. 10: : Gaudenzio Ferrari, *putto* with bowed instrument. Collection of E. Schweitzer, Berlin.

instruments of knowledge and reason, as symbolized by the ancient Greek kithara. Lutes and other fretted, plucked stringed instruments commonly substitute for

ancient instruments in classically-influenced art of the Renaissance. One such work is Raphael's "Parnassus," in which one Muse is depicted playing a lute,

and Apollo himself is playing a *lyra da braccio* (see fig. 12).<sup>19</sup> The relation of the



Fig. 11: Gaudenzio Ferrari, detail from fresco. Santuario, Saronno.

viol to the lute and other fretted plucked instruments has been well established above. Further evidence of the renaissance and view of the viol as belonging to this family is particularly clear in the English practice of

playing the viol “lyra-way;” a highly chordal style of viola da gamba playing that included countless different *scordatura* tunings, and was written in tablature, which was the primary style of notation for plucked-string instruments.

What can be concluded, then, from this pictorial evidence is that the viol was indeed, as Dreyfus says, an instrument of the aristocracy. From these paintings one may conclude that the instrument



Fig. 12: Raphael, *Parnassus*, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican.

<sup>18</sup> Cyr, p. 14

<sup>19</sup> Winternitz, 185-201.

was widely associated with music at court, and with the more learned, Apollonian styles, perhaps. The viol is seen as an instrument of heaven and those mortals who may be closer to heaven than the common man. As an instrument of the more learned styles and of those of wealth and power, those who wished to emulate that wealth and power, i.e. wealthy merchants, bankers and the like, adopted the viol as their own, where it became extremely popular as an instrument of the learned amateur. There is little or no evidence in painting, however, to associate the viol with death.

### Section III: The Viol in Bach's Cantatas and Passions

The consistency across Europe of the images mentioned in the previous chapter speaks to an almost universal idea of the viol's status and at least one of its meanings as a symbol. Though it is doubtful that Bach himself ever saw many of these paintings, it is doubtless that he would have been aware of the ideas depicted in them. Yet scholars refer to the viol in Bach's music as representing death. This is, I feel, not entirely accurate. The role of the viol in Bach's cantatas and Passions is perhaps unique, and often appears in circumstances involving death, but further analysis of the viol parts as they relate to the pieces will paint a somewhat different picture.

The viol as death symbol is simply not consistent with other German use of the viol. Buxtehude uses the viol in songs of praise, such as "Jubilate Domino," as well as pieces on death themes, such as *Muss der Tod denn auch*

*entbinden*. Telemann uses it as he might any other instrument in sonatas and concertos. Kühnel wrote volumes of music for solo viol or viol with continuo, much as Marais did in the French court. But Bach wrote only a small amount for this instrument, and the roles he chooses for it are very specific.

Only five of Bach's cantatas include viol parts. These are Cantata 76, *Die Himmel Erzählen die Ehre Gottes*; Cantata 106, *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*; Cantata 152, *Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn*; Cantata 198, *Trauer Ode*; and Cantata 205, *Der zufriedengestellte Aeolus*. Both the St. Matthew and St. John Passions include viol parts. Of these works, this study will focus on Cantatas 76, 106

Fig. 13.

The image shows a page from a musical score for "No. 58 Aria" in G major, BWV 1058, by Johann Sebastian Bach. The tempo is "Molto adagio". The score is for three parts: Viola da gamba (Violoncello), Alto, and Organo e Continuo. The lyrics are in German. The first system shows the beginning of the piece. The second system shows the vocal part with the lyrics "Es ist vollbracht, es ist vollbracht, o Trost für". The third system shows the vocal part with the lyrics "die gekrönten See-Jes, o Trost, o Trost! es ist voll-".

and 198, and both of the Passions.

Perhaps the reason that the viol has been associated with death in the music of Bach is because of the cantatas and Passion movements in which it appears. Cantata 106, the *Actus Tragicus* is, after all, a funeral cantata, as is the *Trauer Ode*. The viol appears in the Passions when Christ dies on the Cross (St. John), and Jesus' sufferings at the hands of the high priests and the Roman

soldiers (St. Matthew). But when one looks closely at when the viols are playing and what the texts they accompany mean, one begins already to get a sense that “death” is not necessarily the proper symbol for the their roles.

In the St. John Passion, The viola da gamba appears only in the aria, “Es ist vollbracht,” which follows the tonally symmetrical, and decidedly chiastic “Herzstück” (see fig. 13). This aria depicts the point at which Jesus is crucified, and speaks the words, “It is finished.”<sup>20</sup> That Jesus dies at this point is true, and one may be led to believe that the viol is there to represent and lament that death. But the point at which the viol makes its appearance is key to understanding its meaning. One of the most striking characteristics of this Passion, and the one that, according to Chafe, Bach has focused on in his setting, is the idea of the Passion

“...as Jesus’ glorification, the crucifixion as a triumphant event, the “lifting up” of Jesus that links the crucifixion with the resurrection and ascension and makes the Passion a part of John’s “Book of Glory.”<sup>21</sup>

This work is, from the outset in “Herr, unser Herrscher,” certainly not “dominated by lamentation.” Chafe points out that, unlike the St. Matthew Passion, the St. John deals with “...the “showing” and the “drawing” of mankind

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<sup>20</sup> Eric T. Chafe, “The St. John Passion: Theology and Musical Structure,” *Bach Studies*, Don O. Franklin, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.



by an all-powerful God whose very sufferings on earth are triumphant events...."<sup>22</sup>

As stated above, "Es ist vollbracht," comes at the end of and completes the "Herzstück." Eric Chafe writes the following:

"At the expressive height of Jesus' victory in the triumphant middle section of "Es ist vollbracht" (on the words "und schliesst den Kampf") the music abandons suddenly the *stile concitato* and returns to the elegiac tone of the aria's opening section, the soft tone of the solo viola da gamba, the minor key, and the words "Es ist vollbracht...." The D major section of the aria confirms Bach's understanding of the triumphant association of John's "It is finished." But equally clear is his conception of the theological purpose of the *Passion*, which, while directly concerned with indicating the benefit for mankind of Jesus' death, is directed toward understanding and the benefit of faith in the present life, not toward the depiction of transcendent splendor."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Chafe, *Tonal Allegory in the Music of J. S. Bach*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 318-19.

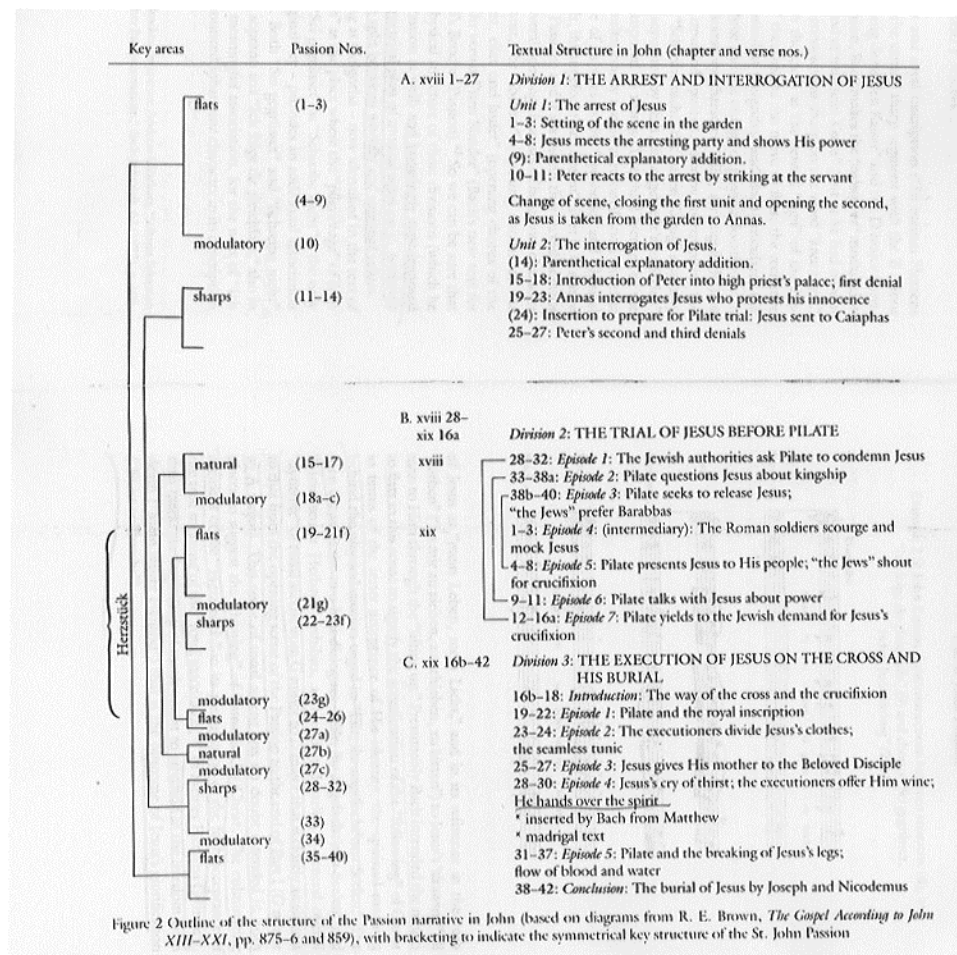


Fig. 16:  
Eric  
Chafe's  
chart on  
the key  
structure  
of the St.  
John  
Passion.

Throughout his article on this work, Chafe emphasizes the central idea in this Passion; that of "faith realized in experience," that the "believer is redeemed *already in this life* (sic)."<sup>24</sup>

Signs and symbols, of course, abound in this work. The symmetrical structure of the Passion itself can be considered a "sign," which is the cross (see fig. 16). According to Chafe, the symmetry is not only in the key structure, nor is it made obscure:

"In the St. John Passion the grouping of repeated choruses gives a palpable sense of symmetrical order in several places, while in a number of madrigal-texted movements – "Herr, unser

<sup>24</sup> Chafe, "St. John," 81.

Herrscher," "Erwäge" and "Es ist vollbracht" *above all* (italics mine) – symmetry correlates with the idea of glorification in abasement. Symmetry, as is well known, appears in Bach's music as a means of representing divine majesty...."<sup>25</sup>

Here we have triumph and redemption for mankind in his own lifetime through the death and resurrection of Jesus, not simply a dying. And to reiterate, the viola da gamba is used only in this aria. Because there really is no sense of "lamentation" in this work, and because it has been shown here that Jesus' death on the cross is a triumphant event, central to the Passion narrative, the idea of the viol as a death symbol, a symbol of the "grief of mourning," "the heroic dream of victory over evil," or the "remote realm of the pastoral" becomes much less likely.

The viola da gamba comes at a much different place in the narrative of the St. Matthew Passion, which in itself is very different from the St. John. But upon close examination, the meaning of the texts the viol accompanies has much the same sense as the meaning in "Es ist vollbracht. Chafe also has quite a bit to say about this recitative and aria, "Mein Jesus schweigt" and "Geduld."

According the Lutheran theology, the Passion has three uses. The first is *Sündenerkenntnis*, or the recognition of sin. The second is *Tröstung des Gewissens*, of the comforting of the conscience. The third is its "exemplary role," expressed in the following words from the Passion sermon:

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

“After your heart has thus become firm in Christ, and love, not fear of pain, has made you a foe of sin, then Christ’s passion must from that day on become a pattern for your entire life.”<sup>26</sup>

This is the “actively operating” stage of faith; the putting of words and belief into action. He points to the viol in this case as a signal

instrument, pointing up the two scenes in the Passion in which this belief is signified. The first, coming before “Mein Jesus schweigt” and “Geduld” (see fig. 17), is the punishment of Jesus by the high priests, the false witnesses, and Jesus’ silence before the trial. “Ja! freilich” and “Komm, süßes Kreuz” (see fig. 18), then punctuate the scene depicting Jesus’ suffering at the hands of the Romans after the trial. Chafe points out that the “narratives of these two scenes are clearly parallel,” augmented by Bach musically by “tonal planning, chorales, and even connections between the two *turba* choruses.”<sup>27</sup> Chafe goes on the state the following:

“These two scenes articulate the ethical stage of Luther’s meditative scheme naturally and even inevitably, for Luther’s

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>27</sup> Chafe, *Tonal Allegory*, 354-55.

treatment of the Passion as a model introduces a different meaning for suffering from that brought out in “O Schmerz.” In “O Schmerz” man’s torment was the result of his guilt and led to his recognizing his sin and to repentance. Now, however, suffering is innocent, not a judgement by God for sin but a punishment at the hands of worldly, antagonistic forces. Instead of leading to consciousness of guilt and repentance, this kind of suffering must be endured patiently as the cross of the faithful.... This viewpoint is expressed by the arioso “Mein Jesus schweigt” and the aria “Geduld.”<sup>28</sup>

Jesus’  
triumph in death  
on the Cross in  
the St. John  
Passion is the  
innocent  
suffering; the

“punishment at the hands of worldly forces” depicted here This redemption through suffering is, in turn, the triumph of “Es ist vollbracht,” and the viol is there to accompany it.

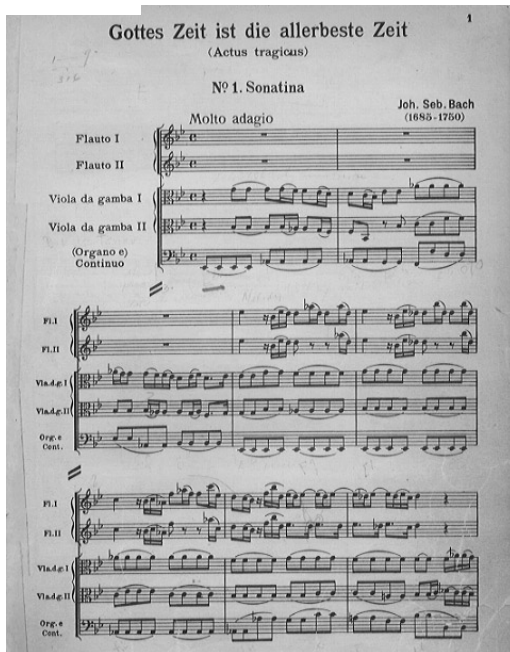
There is one problem, however. These movements were originally scored for lute solo. But Chafe has the following to say, especially as regards “Ja! freilich” and “Komm, süßes Kreuz,” and in the viol’s defense:

“While the change from lute to gamba might have been motivated by practical considerations, it is clear that Bach wanted to create a movement of special instrumental character at this point.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 355.

The textual and other kinds of musical connections between the scenes in which “Geduld” and “Komm, süßes Kreuz” appear leave no doubt that the addition of the gamba to the earlier scene only in the 1740s was meant to emphasize an already existing relationship.... “Ja, freilich” and “Komm, süßes Kreuz” completes the theology introduced in “Mein Jesus schweigt” and “Geduld.” Just as the oboes da caccia changed their role through the series of movements that dealt with Luther’s dynamic of faith, so the viola da gamba progressively emerges from being a chordal continuo part to being the only fully chordal solo gamba piece in Bach’s oeuvre. The piece is unique, something that could not be said even of the lute original.... Bach wanted “Geduld” to anticipate a state that would only be attained in “Komm, süßes Kreuz,” when the dotted rhythm pervading both arias would serve an entirely different affect, and the gamba would cease doubling the basso continuo to take the lead in an exceptional manner. In the latter aria the middle section voices the individual’s willingness to let Jesus bear the weight of his suffering.... The cross has become an instrument of benefit for the individual. No doubt the gamba part, with its many cross figures, was intended to represent that instrument”<sup>29</sup>

Fig. 19



The viol parts of the two Passions have been examined first because of the uniqueness of the viol parts within the works. They appear only at very specific points. In two of the five cantatas in which the viol appears, *Actus Tragicus* and the *Trauer Ode*, however, the viol plays though the majority of each piece. In the three others, cantatas 76, 152, and 205, it appears

for only one or two movements. Though each of these cantatas was composed

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 357-58.

prior to the Passions, it can be shown that the meaning of the viols remains consistent. Cantata 106, *Actus Tragicus*, will be examined first.

The viols begin Cantata 106 with the symphonia (see fig. 19), and continue to play along with the choir and soli. They accompany the tenor during the aria, “Ach Herr” (see fig. 20), which is a prayer to God to “teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”<sup>30</sup> The viols are absent, though, from the bass aria, “Bestelle dein Haus” (see fig. 21), which warns the listener that he or she “shalt die and not live.”<sup>31</sup> Just so in the next chorus, “Es ist der alte Bund, Mensch du mußt sterben!” (see fig. 22). The old covenant is death.

The next soprano arioso, “Ja, komm, Herr Jesu!” begins without the viols, but

they enter within four measures and accompany the soprano nearly to the end of her prayer (see fig. 23). Though the viols are absent during the next two solo ariosi, they join in when the alto and bass sing a duet of each of their lines, “In deine Hände befehl ich meinen Geist” and “Heute wirst du mit mir im Paradies sein” (see fig. 24). The viols

The image shows a page of a musical score for Johann Sebastian Bach's Cantata 106, Actus Tragicus. It features three systems of staves. Each system includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Violin (Via. d.p. I), Viola (Via. d.p. II), Tenor (T.), and Bass (Cont.). The first system shows the beginning of the tenor aria 'Ach Herr' with the lyrics 'Ach, Herr! Herr, lehre uns be - den-ken, Herr, lehre uns be -'. The second system shows the beginning of the bass aria 'Bestelle dein Haus' with the lyrics 'den-ken, ach, Herr! Herr, leh-re uns be -'. The third system shows the continuation of the bass aria with the lyrics 'den-ken, Herr, leh-re uns be-den-ken, daß wir'. The score is written in G major and 3/4 time.

Fig. 20

are then omitted for the beginning of the allegro of the final chorus, but join in after fifteen bars (see fig. 25).

<sup>30</sup> John Eliot Gardiner, liner notes to Johann Sebastian Bach, *Kantaten BWV 106, 118b, 198*, The Monteverdi Choir, The English Baroque Soloists, John Eliot Gardiner, Archiv 429 782-2.

<sup>31</sup> Chafe, “St. John,” 92.







Fig. 24

Chafe also describes the tonal organization of the cantata (see fig. 26), which descends from E flat major, to c minor to b flat minor at the end of the

Fugue/solo/chorale complex, which is the perceived center of the piece. From there an ascent begins with “In deine Hände,” rising through A flat major to c minor, and finally arriving in E flat major.



Fig. 25

Chafe interprets this as an allegory of Luther’s “analogy of faith.”<sup>34</sup> It mirrors Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection, as well a Christian’s own life:

“...The experience of the Law brings the man down (the descending sequence of keys for the Old Testament texts), while the encounter with Christ and “conformity” (sic) to his sufferings (“In deine Hände) and the message of the Gospel (“Heute wirst du mit mir”) give him the understanding (Mit Fried’ und Freud”) that ultimately restores him to God (“Glorie, Lob, Her’ und Herrlichkeit”).”<sup>35</sup>

The key to understanding the symbolism of the viols is in first examining where they *don’t* play. The viol is conspicuously absent during movements that reflect Old Testament texts; “Bestelle dein Haus,” “Es ist der alte Bund,” and “In deine Hände.” They accompany the voices only at the beginning of the descent. By the beginning of “Bestelle dein Haus,” only the recorders remain. The viols

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 103.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

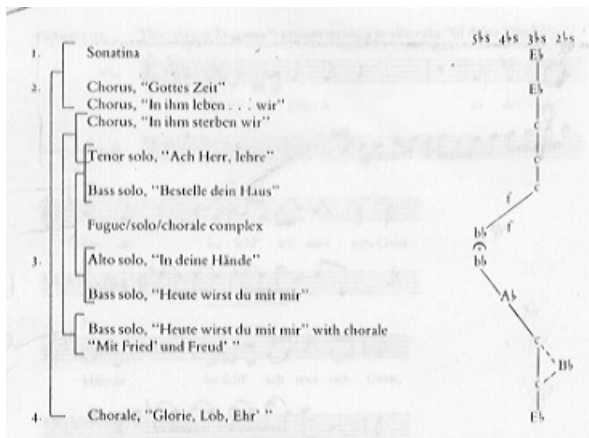


Fig. 26: Chart by Eric Chafe.

return, however, after four bars of the soprano's plea toward the end of the complex, "Komm, Herr Jesu." Chafe describes "In deine Hände" as conveying "the important first definition of the faith that "reigns in the deepest darkness."<sup>36</sup> He describes

the return of the viols during the ascent as follows:

"After "In deine Hände" the music moves upward to A flat for Jesus' promise from the cross, then on to C minor for the entrance of Luther's chorale "Mit Fried' und Freud" accompanied by the viola da gambas. Led by the As of Luther's Dorian melody, the upward progression continues through G minor to B flat *major* for the start of the third phrase of the chorale, "getrost ist mir mein Herz und Sinn." This phrase closes in C minor. The remaining three lines of "Mit Fried' und Freud" then continue alone, with more than a hint that the new view of death as "peace and joy" is a "possession" created by faith."<sup>37</sup>

That the viol accompanies only New Testament texts, seemingly answers the plea of the soprano in "Komm, Herr Jesu," and makes it's reappearance as described above suggests symbolism completely consistent with that seen in the Passions. It is present accompanying texts that emphasize triumph in death and redemption from suffering through faith. The symmetry of the viol parts in the work overall, with them being present at the beginning, the centerpiece, and the

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

end, points to the chiastic structure of the entire work, and is consistent with the chiastic symbol of the viol described by Chafe in the St. John and St. Matthew



Fig. 27

Passions above. In this light, it becomes possible that the viol as a symbol points directly at the cross as the center of the idea of triumph in death and redemption

from suffering through faith.

Cantata 76, *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes*, the viol is used in much the same way as in the St.

Matthew Passion, in that over the course of the narrative that it delineates, it begins as



Fig. 28

a continuo instrument, and finishes as a soloistic obligato instrument with a major role to play. The viol first makes its appearance in the Sinfonia (see fig. 27) that opens the second half of the cantata. It continues as the bass instrument in the continuo for the bass recitative "Gott segne noch die treue Schar." It accompanies the tenor in a more active continuo line in the following aria, "Hasse nur, hasse mich recht" (see fig. 28). It is then part of the continuo for the alto recitative, "Ich fühle schon im Geist," and the following aria, in which it has a duet in invertible counterpoint with the oboe d'amore (see fig. 29). Just as in the St. Matthew Passion, we see the viol accompanying a narrative of redemption

through and from suffering and through faith. The recitative “Gott segne noch”

12. Aria

Oboe d'amore

Viola da gamba

Alto

Continuo

Fig. 29

and aria “Hasse nur,” in which the viol plays its continuo role, begins with a blessing (in the recitative) on those who spread God’s word. The aria depicts the suffering of such a one at the hands of those who would hate and persecute Christians

for their faith. The singer tells those that hate him that, persecute him though they might, Jesus’ love will transcend their hatred. In the following recitative and arioso, “Ich fühle shon im Geist,” the viol, still as a continuo instrument, accompanies the alto as he/she rejoices in the love of God and the brotherhood of Christians. In the following aria which is the final aria of the cantata, “Liebt ihr Christen,” the viol is now joined by an oboe d’amore in an invertible counterpoint accompaniment of the alto. The text urges Christians to do good in the world, to give their lives for one another, and to help one another in their times of need, as Jesus did. Just as in the St. Matthew Passion, the viol accompanies a text which preaches the “actively operating” stage of faith, the putting of words and belief into action.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Handbook to Bach’s Sacred Cantata Texts: An Interlinear Translation with Reference Guide to Biblical Quotations and Allusions*, Compiled by Melvin P. Unger, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1996).

The viol begins as a continuo instrument, accompanying the faithful Christian who is persecuted for his faith. By the last aria, the viol is engaged in a learned contrapuntal duet, accompanying the “Do unto others” text. The learned style of invertible counterpoint is in itself symbolic. A recent article by David Yearsley has shown Baroque contrapuntal styles such as this to be very closely related to and tied in with alchemy; the idea of transfiguration of base materials into higher ones, such as gold, and the belief in the existence of the “philosopher’s stone,” by which these materials may be transfigured.<sup>39</sup> That Bach was aware, and even a close associate of some of those who shared in these beliefs is clearly demonstrated by Yearsley. Clearly, in this light, the viol, as symbol of redemption and triumph through faith, is also part of the transfiguration of the base man into a higher being. The viol may even be a symbol of a spiritual philosopher’s stone. But, as in all the examples above, it still is not a symbol of death or mourning.

The viol also appears in two of the secular cantatas of Bach. The *Trauer Ode*, Cantata 198, is particularly relevant here, as it reinforces the idea of the viol as a symbol of triumph and redemption through suffering and through putting one’s faith into action, as well as introducing us to other, more secular symbols that the viol represents. This cantata was composed in 1727 to a text by Johann Christoph Gottsched as a Funeral Ode for Queen Christiane Eberhardine, Electress of Saxony. Laurence Dreyfus writes the following:

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<sup>39</sup> David Yearsley, “Alchemy and Counterpoint in an Age of Reason,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 1998, vol. 51, no. 2, 201-243

“The Electress was especially beloved in Leipzig because she had not succumbed to a politically motivated conversion to Roman Catholicism when her husband, August the Strong, acceded to the throne of the Kingdom of Poland. Not only did she refuse to follow her husband into his new Polish lands and into his newfound confession, but her attachment to Lutheranism was so strong that she also separated herself both from the King’s court and from his bed and withdrew to a house in the Saxon countryside for the last years of her life.”<sup>40</sup>

Just as in the sacred cantatas and Passions, the viols are only present with the full orchestra in the more triumphant movements, absent during texts of mourning. Dreyfus writes the following regarding the opening chorus:

“The musical environment for this choral invocation is a highly evocative musical amalgam of French dotted figures characterizing a regal grand *entrée* in a ballet combined with a strange aristocratic blend of quiet instruments such as viola da gambas and lutes....”<sup>41</sup>

Here we see the viol as a symbol of aristocracy and nobility; a symbol that is very familiar from the paintings described in the previous chapter. This symbol is present elsewhere in the cantata, and the symbol is depicted more by the viols’ absence than any other stylistic characteristic. They are the only strings *not* present and playing during the aria “Verstummt, ihr holden Saiten!” (Be dumb, ye sweet strings), and it’s preceding recitative “Dein Sachsen.” That the violins

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<sup>40</sup> Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 232.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

continue to play, though the courts of Saxony and Meißen are “struck dumb.”

Clearly, the viol signifies that nobility. That the violins play through the aria

The image shows a page from a musical score. At the top, it is labeled 'ARIA.' Below this, there are four staves. The first two are for 'Viola da gamba I' and 'Viola da gamba II'. The third is for 'Alto.' and the fourth is for 'Lute I.H. (C Continuo)'. The music is written in a historical style, with various note values and rests. The violas have a more active part than the other instruments in this section.

suggests that the viols are the “sweet strings;”

again the silence, as though struck dumb with grief, of the courts. There is also one exception

to the general absence of the viols during the more sorrowful texts. The viols are present

during the recitative “Der Glocken bebendes

Getön.” They play a leaping eighth-note

figure throughout the movement, which

contributes to the general cacophony created by the rest of the orchestra. This

refers again perhaps to the viol’s courtly role, and the distress of those in higher

places, right along with the “whole European world.”<sup>42</sup>

The viol retains the symbolic role it plays in the sacred cantatas, however.

For example, they are the only other instruments beside the basso continuo

accompanying the alto in “Wie starb die Heldin” (see fig. 30). The text of this

aria is translated here:

“How contentedly the heroine died!  
How bravely her spirit struggled  
when death’s arm overcame her  
before he conquered her breast!”<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Gardiner Liner notes

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Once again, the accompanies a text of triumph and transcendence in death.

Dreyfus reinforces this idea in the following statement:

“A feminized, earthly Passion story -- that is, a tale of suffering and transcendence -- is also in evidence in other movements of this work. Both the insistent pulsating continuo pedals and the orchestral groans and sighs that accompany the soprano recitative, for example, recall the tenor recitative from the St. Matthew Passion, “O Schmerz, hier zittert das gequälte Herz.””<sup>44</sup>

In this cantata, the celebrant is a heroine who has triumphed over her adversaries in this case by putting her specifically Lutheran faith into action, and though she surely suffered for that faith, is triumphant in death. She is depicted here as a Lutheran Christ-like figure. That viols would appear in this “earthly Passion story,” then, should come as no surprise.

The other secular cantata that contains a part for viola da gamba is Cantata 205, *Zerreisset, zesprenget, zertrümmert die Gruft*, written in 1725 for the name-day of August Friedrich Müller, doctor of philosophy at the University of Leipzig. The viol makes its appearance as an obligato instrument as the Zephyr departs in the aria, “Frische Schatten, meine Freude.” This cantata will not be analyzed at this time.

There remains one sacred cantata, BWV 152, which will also not be analyzed at this time. The viol appears only in the opening sinfonia, and accompanies no texts. Because of this, it falls outside the realm of the current study.



## Conclusion

The viol eventually fell into a period of neglect after the first half of the eighteenth century. Its quiet, introverted timbre simply could not compete in the increasingly larger performance spaces with its cousin the 'cello.<sup>45</sup> The reduced demand for chamber music at court also played a role in the instrument's fall from favor. During Bach's lifetime, the viol was reaching new heights in its repertoire, especially in France and Germany. At the same time, in Italy it had been pretty much forgotten since the early seventeenth century. It is this dichotomy, perhaps, and the viol's eventual doom to the status of a mere curiosity, that may have led various scholars to attach symbols of Antiquity, mourning, and death to its repertoire.

These symbols, however, simply do hold up under closer investigation, and have been shown to be clearly inaccurate when applied to the music of J. S. Bach. During its heyday, the viola da gamba was a very popular instrument throughout Europe, and, like most instruments, represented to its listeners the milieu with which it was associated. That the viol was an instrument cultivated by aristocratic and upper bourgeois society has been made very clear by the contexts in which it is included in visual representations from the period, and in at least part of its symbolic meaning in Bach's *Trauer Ode*.

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<sup>44</sup> Dreyfus, p. 239.

<sup>45</sup> Hubert LeBlanc, "Défense de la viole," trans. By Barbara Garvey Jackson, *Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society of America*, Vols. 10-11, 1973-74.

But the idea of the viol as a symbol of death and mourning, or even of pastoral affects and Antiquity, completely crumbles when the viol's roles in Bach's cantatas and Passions are analyzed. As we have seen, time and time again the viol is present in the heart of chiastic structures. It outlines narratives and accompanies texts that emphasize one of the central ideas of Christian theology; the idea of Jesus' triumph in His death on the cross and resurrection, and that His triumph is mankind's triumph. The viol is a symbol of faith in action. It is a symbol of the New Covenant. It is a symbol of redemption through suffering, and of deliverance from suffering through the crucifixion. In this light, as in cantata 76, it can even be seen to symbolize God's promise as the spiritual "philosopher's stone" that can transfigure the base man into a higher being.

Obviously, there is quite a bit more room for further exploration of this topic. There are, admittedly, a number stones left unturned. I am immediately led to wonder why this instrument was chosen as this powerful signifier, and if these symbols were apparent to contemporary listeners. Could all of this be part of what is signified by viols in angel paintings? What does the viol mean, if anything, in Bach's instrumental works? But one thing should be clear; that the viol is a rare and extraordinarily powerful symbol in the Cantatas and Passions of J.S. Bach.

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