The Sacred Codes of the Six-Part Ricercar

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As with other late cyclic works by Bach, The Musical Offering has been the subject of a wide range of musicological interpretations with regard to the arrangement of the movements, the purpose of the entire work, or any extra-musical background it might have. It has been viewed as abstract music never intended for actual performance, as a treatise of classical rhetorics, and as a representation of Kepler’s “music of the spheres”. It is unlikely that the work should have been intended as musica pura (meant only for the eyes and the intellect); Bach was too pragmatic a musician for that. Yet I, for one, do not rule out the possibility of parallel readings, the validity (even partial validity) of all the approaches listed above.

Among the theories about external sources of influence, Michael Marissen’s is the best-founded and the most plausible, drawing attention to the possibility of theological connotations. Marissen sees an incongruity between the official dedication to Frederick the Great and the affect of the music, which is often melancholy, even mournful.

Bach’s music seems to project rather different notions of glory. Far from elevating or shedding radiance and splendor on Frederick, the Musical Offering promotes a biblical understanding of glory—the idea of “glorification through abasement”, a view tied up with Luther’s “theology of the cross” as opposed to the “theology of glory”.

Marissen has pointed out that the trio sonata is a contrapuntal sonata da chiesa, whose style was at odds with Frederick’s secular tastes. He finds special meaning in the fact that the canons are ten in number, as this may be an allusion to the Ten Commandments, which Bach often associated with canonic structure to represent obedience to the Law. According to Marissen, the inscription Quaerendo invenietis, found over Canon No. 9, alludes to the Sermon on the Mount (“Seek and ye shall find”, Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9). The main title, Opfer (“offering”), makes it possible for the cycle to be viewed as an Offertory in the religious sense of the word.

In the present article, I will attempt to tease out the possible sacred connections of the six-part ricercar, the most monumental movement in The Musical Offering.

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4 Hans-Eberhard Dentler, J. S. Bach’s “Musicalisches Opfer.” Musik als Abbild der Sphärenharmonie. (Mainz: Schott, 2008)
6 See, for instance, the chorale arrangement Dies sind die heil’gen zehn Gebot’ from Clavier-Übung III (BWV 678) or the opening chorus of Cantata No. 77 (Du sollst Gott, deinen Herren, lieben).
Quaerendo invenietis. The authorial injunction to seek does not only relate to the enigma canons but to the six-part ricercar as well, whose archaic title also means to seek. As we shall see, there are several Biblical citations hidden in this movement, and their discovery is made especially difficult by various compositional maneuvers. The unique formal structure of the ricercar provides a clue: certain anomalies, apparent inconsistencies, musical “disturbances” as it were, might point to external, non-musical influences.

Anomalies of form

The grandiose six-part fugue opens with a regular, six-fold exposition of the lengthy and complex “royal theme” (Thema Regium) (measures 1–56, first line of Example 2, see on page 3). Afterwards, the theme is heard six more times for a total of twelve, with the theme appearing one more time in each voice. In the exposition the theme is joined by a constant countersubject. By phase 5, this countersubject is reduced to a fragment; in phase 6 it does not appear at all. The lengthy exposition is followed by an episode of unusual length (measures 57–78) whose material, as Christoph Wolff has pointed out, is strongly reminiscent of the “Gravement” section from the organ fantasy in G (BWV 572).

Several additional themes and motifs are introduced in the course of the ricercar, in general without a regular exposition in all six voices. These additional themes and motifs are almost always connected to the main theme, either to its full form or to some of its components, such as the initial ascending triad or the chromatic descent in the middle.

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7 For the sake of clarity, my chart follows the time signature 2/2 found in the manuscript, rather than the printed edition’s 4/2.
9 The original title of this work is Pièce d’orgue.
Example 2. The Form of Ricercar a 6

The first among several puzzling “inconsistencies” occurs at the moment where the first additional theme is introduced (measures 78–89); unlike the others, this theme is not joined with the main theme. Its five entries are, instead, immediately followed by a second additional theme (measure 89) which, however, does immediately connect to the main theme as a counterpoint to its initial motif, following the “rule.” The final entry of this theme overlaps the seventh entry of the main theme (measure 95, end of the second line in Example 2).

Starting with measure 103, four new themes are being introduced in permutation (Example 2, beginning of the third line). Strictly speaking, only three of these themes are really new, the fourth one being none other than the chromatically descending segment of the main theme. After six permutational phases, presented in canon, we hear the eighth entry of the main theme; once again, the chromatic segment is joined by the three new themes. From measure 123 onward, another new element appears in the form of a scalar figure in continuous eighth-notes (immediately inverted); this figure is repeatedly combined with the inversion of the main theme’s opening motif, the latter being used both in its original note-values and in diminution.

After the thematic entries nos. 9 and 10 (measure 131ff.), a shorter version of the earlier lengthy episode leads to another new theme (better called a motive on account of its brevity). The latter is distinguished by the fact that it is presented in two voices in parallel thirds and sixths, in the manner of a canon sine pausis, contrapuntally combined with the triads of the main theme. (Such canonic entries with no pauses are rather rare in Bach’s fugues, except in their final sections where they are used as the densest kind of stretto). This section, which is only six measures long, is followed by thematic entry No. 11, and, in measure 179, by yet another new theme. The length of this theme is not altogether clear; at first it appears to extend to three measures, yet its repeats are only two measures long and by the time of the main theme’s final entry in measure 197 only a few notes are left of it. (It is another unusual procedure!) This theme is a “direct descendant” of the A-flat major fugue theme from the Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 2 (BWV 886/2, notated in 4/4 time). The chromatic countersubjects are also similar.

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10 See the G-minor fugue from the Well-Tempered Clavier Book 2 (BWV 885/2), or Contrapunctus 10 from The Art of Fugue (BWV 1080/10).
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Example 3. Measures 179–81 of Ricercar a 6 and *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 2 (BWV 886/2)

In this contrapuntally dense passage (measures 179–197), we repeatedly hear one of the themes from the permutative section,\(^\text{1}\) as well as the theme presented in two voices. The final entry of the royal theme is juxtaposed with the last fragments of the diminishing final countertheme and, in another unusual move, with a reminiscence of an earlier theme (measures 78–89), which had been previously left “incomplete.”

We can see, then, that the six-part ricercar contains many unique formal features and unusual solutions in terms of counterpoint and, above all, dramaturgy. Similarly to those irregularities in the orbits of the planets that point to the existence of unknown celestial bodies yet to be discovered, these musical “disturbances” also suggest the influence of distant forces.

A concealed enigma canon

Before proceeding any further on the way to elucidating these influencing forces, we must point out the presence of another unusual compositional trick, an “enigma within the enigma” which first alerted the present writer to the possibility of a theological background for the fugue.

*Quaerendo invenietis:* the permutational sections of the six-part ricercar (measures 103–115) contain the thematic incipits of the *Fulde* canon (BWV 1077). The identification is made difficult by the fact that this double enigma canon was originally in G major, notated in note values four times as fast as in the ricercar.

\(^{1}\) At this point, the theme appears without dotting. The third time, it appears in ornamented form, which brings it close to the E-minor fugue from *WTC Book 2* (BWV 879/2, transposed here into C minor to facilitate comparison).
The fact that there are fourteen canons is significant in view of the important role played by that number in the six-part ricercar.

Several interpretations have been proposed for this motto. Zoltán Gárdonyi sees the symbolic meaning of the three-fold C alliteration in the fact that in both canons, the voice entrances are separated by four beats (4/4 = C), and that the note C functions as the axis of symmetry in the mirror canon. See Zoltán Gárdonyi, *J. S. Bach kánon- és fúgaszerkesztő művészete* (“J. S. Bach’s Art of the Canon and the Fugue”). (Budapest: Editio Musica, 1972), 23.

It is certainly possible that Bach thought of himself when he wrote down this motto. After all, the melody corresponding to his name was also shaped like a cross; therefore he was, symbolically speaking, a “cross-bearer” himself. In addition, he bore other Christological signs as well, a circumstance he was probably aware of. According to the Christian gematria, his name yields the number 14 (B=2 + A=1 + C=3 + H=8), which is connected to another Christ symbol, the “A and Ω” (“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last,” Revelation 22:13). In Latin and German transliteration, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet became “A and O,” which were firmly connected to the number 14 since “O” is the 14th letter of these alphabets. This symbolic connection was reinforced in the chorale by Paul Speratus *Es ist das Heil uns kommen her* summarizing Luther’s teachings and greatly admired by Luther himself. The author marked the 14 verses of his chorale by the letters A through O, to emphasize the Biblical message of the poem. See further Eric T. Chafe, *Anfang und Ende: Cyclic Recurrence in Bach’s Cantata Jesu, nun sei gepreiset, BWV 41,* *Bach Perspectives I*, ed. Russell Stinson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1995), 103–134).

Bach’s last name and initials (J=9 + S=18 + BACH=14) yield the number 41, which is also a “Biblical” number, since Jesus was born in the 41st generation after Abraham (Matthew 1:17). This number appears in the “Omnes generationes” movement of Bach’s *Magnificat* (BWV 243). See Zoltán Gönz, *Bach testamentuma* [“Bach’s Testament”] (Budapest: Gramofon könyvek, 2009), 68–69.
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The reasons for the unusual formal features of the ricercar: The foundation

Proceeding further along our train of thought, the number of themes in the movement, their manner of development and, above all, the unusual dramaturgy of the composition, indicate that the fugue’s foundation is none other than the Ten Commandments—presented in the order in which they appear in Martin Luther’s two decalogue chorals. In those chorales, the order of the last two commandments had been reversed from Luther’s Large and Small Catechisms—a reversal that happened for a good reason and had some far-reaching consequences.

The shorter of the two Luther chorales is Mensch willst du leben seliglich in 5 verses; the longer is Dies sind die heil’gen zehn Gebot’, in 12 verses.14 For our purposes, the longer version will be more helpful.

1. Dies sind die heil’gen Zehn Gebot’,
   Die uns gab unser Herre Gott
   Durch Moses, seinen Diener treu,
   Hoch auf dem Berg Sinai.
   Kyrieleis!

2. Ich bin allein dein Gott, der Herr,
   Kein’ Götter sollst du haben mehr;
   Du sollst mir ganz vertrauen dich,
   Von Herzensgrund lieben mich.
   Kyrieleis!

3. Du sollst nicht führen zu Unehr’n
   Den Namen Gottes, deines Herrn;
   Du sollst nicht preisen recht noch gut,
   Ohn’ was Gott selbst red’t und tut.
   Kyrieleis!

4. Du sollst heil’gen den Feiertag,
   Daß du und dein Haus ruhen mag;
   Du sollst von dein’m Tun laßen ab,
   Daß Gott sein Werk in dir hab’.
   Kyrieleis!

5. Du sollst ehr’n und gehorsam sein
   Dem Vater und der Mutter dein,
   Und wo dein’ Hand ihn’n dienen kann,
   So wirst du lang’s Leben hab’n.
   Kyrieleis!

6. Du sollst nicht töten zorniglich,
   Nicht haßen noch selbst rächen dich,
   Geduld haben und sanften Mut
   Und auch dem Feind tun das Gut’.
   Kyrieleis!

7. Dein Eh’ sollst du bewahren rein,  
Daß auch dein Herz kein’ andre mein’,  
Und halten keusch das Leben dein  
Mit Zucht und Mässigkeit fein.  
Kyrieleis!

8. Du sollst nicht stehlen Geld noch Gut,  
Nicht wuchern jemand’s Schweiß und Blut;  
Du sollst auftun dein’ milde Hand  
Den Armen in deinem Land.  
Kyrieleis!

9. Du sollst kein falscher Zeuge sein,  
Nicht lügen auf den Nächsten dein:  
Sein Unschuld sollst auch retten du  
Und seine Schand’ decken zu.  
Kyrieleis!

10. Du sollst dein’s Nächsten Weib und Haus  
Begehren nicht noch etwas draus;  
Du sollst ihm wünschen alles Gut’,  
Wie dir dein Herz selber tut.  
Kyrieleis!

11. Die Gebot all’ uns geben sind,  
Daß du dein’ Sünd’, o Menschenkind,  
Erkennen sollst und lernen wohl,  
Wie man vor Gott leben soll.  
Kyrieleis!

12. Das helf’ uns der Herr Jesus Christ,  
Der unser Mittler worden ist;  
Es ist mit unsern Tun verlor’n  
Verdienen doch eitel Zorn.  
Kyrieleis!

The complex circular composition of the ricercar makes a linear interpretation very difficult if not impossible. The reason for certain compositional decisions only becomes clear later on; as with so many late works by Bach, this one can only be understood if one proceeds backwards from the end.

As a first approach, despite these difficulties, we are able to list the musical images of the individual commandments, since they are represented in individual themes.
Example 5. The Themes of Ricercar a 6

1. I am the Lord your God. It is not the only time in Bach’s oeuvre that the fugue itself symbolizes the Almighty; one may cite the great triple fugue in E-flat from the third volume of the Clavier-Übung (BWV 552/2), one must note that this work is also based on the Catechism and is often referred to (and with good reason) as the “Trinity” fugue. The main theme of the six-part ricercar occupies an even more pronounced position at the top of the thematic hierarchy than is the case in the E-flat major fugue. The Thema Regium is present everywhere, everything revolves around it, and all other themes and motives are its “servants” as they are contrapuntally combined with it.

2. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. The second theme (which is somewhat reminiscent of the first theme in the above-mentioned fugue in E-flat) confronts us with the first situation where a “linear” interpretation is impossible. The command “not to misuse” is realized by not articulating the theme at this point; the theme is hidden and some of its important characteristics remain unnoticeable. It is there but you cannot see it; you can divine it but it is not really audible.

Example 6. Fugue in E-flat Major (BWV 552/2) and Theme 2

3. Remember the Sabbath day. According to the general rules of fugue-writing, the third theme, introduced after the six phases of the exposition, should join the seventh\footnote{“The word holy day is rendered from the Hebrew word sabbath which properly signifies to rest, that is, to abstain from labor. […] Now, in the Old Testament, God separated the seventh day, and appointed it for rest, and commanded that it should be regarded as holy above all others.” (Martin Luther: Large Catechism, transl. by F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau. Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church. [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921], 565–773.)} entrance of
the main theme; but the theme, following the third commandment, takes a “rest,” “keeps the Sabbath,” and does not become a countersubject.

4. Honor your father and your mother. One would expect a melody from the time exuding family intimacy, yet something very different is happening: we hear the opening notes of Luther’s chorale Wir glauben all’ an einen Gott, with the same rhythmic syncopations as in the Clavier-Übung arrangement (BWV 680). As this chorale of the Lutheran Creed is joined with the incipit of the main theme (measures 89–90), another important chorale, Philipp Nicolai’s Wachet auf, is hinted at. This section of the ricercar revives the older genre of the chorale quodlibet. The Luther quote is mysterious at first, but if we read more of its text, the connection becomes clear:

Wir glauben all’ an einen Gott,  
Schöpfer Himmels und der Erden,  
Der sich zum Vater geben hat,  
Dass wir seine Kinder werden.

We all believe in one true God,  
Who created earth and heaven,  
The Father, who to us in love  
Hath the right of children given.

It is a heart-rending confession from a composer who had lost both his parents by the age of ten.

Example 7. Theme 4 and the Chorale Prelude BWV 680

5. You shall not murder. The fifth theme is nothing but the ascending theme from the Fulde canon, with the motto Christus Coronabit Crucigeros (see Example 4.). One of its countersubjects is formed by the central portion of the main theme containing the passus duriusculus. The textual symbolism of the canon and the chromatic descent suggesting the Passion seem to point in the same direction: the murder (crucifixion) that forms the center of the New Testament. The fifth theme follows the outline of the turba from the St. John Passion in which the crowd demands Jesus to be crucified (BWV 245/38). “Wir haben ein Gesetz, und nach dem Gesetz soll er sterben, denn er hat sich selbst zu Gottes Sohn gemacht” – “We have a

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16 This melody appears frequently in Bach’s œuvre: e.g. Allabreve in D, BWV 589; Fugue in C major, WTC I, BWV 846/2; Invention in E major, BWV 777; “Gratias” and “Dona nobis pacem” from the Mass in B minor, BWV 232/6, 25.
17 See the “Crucifixus” from the Mass in B minor, BWV 232/16.
18 The two works also have their permutational structure in common. It is worth noticing that one of the differences between the Fulde canon (BWV 1077) concealed in the ricercar and the earlier version of that canon (BWV 1087/11) lies precisely in dotting the second note of the ascending theme.
law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.” John 19:7).

Example 8. Theme 5 and the Turba from the St. John Passion

6. You shall not commit adultery. The winding melody of theme 6 seems to evoke the seductive serpent. This serpent is not the hellish variety (höllische Schlange) found in BWV 40/4 but rather a shrewder, more insidious specimen. (“The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” Genesis 3:13). This motive appears in the lullaby from the cantata Herkules auf dem Scheidewege (BWV 213/3), where the child protagonist is being seduced by a female allegorical figure who is Lust personified. In this mythological story, too, a serpent appears to murder the child, but the latter kills the beast. Parodied in the Christmas Oratorio (BWV 248/19), the same aria which was erotically charged in a polytheistic, pagan context, becomes “spotless” in the new monotheistic and sacred reading.

Example 9. Theme 6 and the Cantata BWV 213

7. You shall not steal. The seventh theme breaks the commandment as it “steals” the pitch content of the previous theme. It does so rather blatantly: theme 7 consistently follows theme 6, but when 6 and 7 are contrapuntally combined, 7 arrives first by way of pre-imitation.

Example 10. Theme 7 Combined with Theme 6

Luther himself cites Hercules in his commentary on the Decalogue in the Large Catechism: Thus, for example, the heathen who put their trust in power and dominion elevated Jupiter as the supreme god; the others, who were bent upon riches, happiness, or pleasure, and a life of ease, Hercules, Mercury, Venus or others...” See fn. 15.
8. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. It is in this passage that thematic inversion appears for the first time in the ricercar. This contrapuntal procedure may stand for untrustworthiness, hypocrisy and falsehood in Bach’s music, as in the opening movement of Cantata 179 (“Siehe zu, dass deine Gottesfurcht nicht Heuchelei sei, und diene Gott nicht mit falschem Herzen!”).

Example 11. Excerpt from BWV 179/1

Reversed directions symbolize the false testimony on the basis of which Jesus is condemned to death. In the St. Matthew Passion (BWV 244/39), the two false witnesses say: “This fellow said: ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days’” (Matthew 26/61) – note the reversal in “destroy” and “rebuild”.

Example 12. Excerpt from BWV 244/39

9. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. Theme 9 is heard in parallel thirds and sixths as a remarkable instance of madrigalism.

Example 13. Theme 9

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20 This testimony is the distortion of a previous, symbolic and prophetic pronouncement of Jesus: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it in three days.” “But the temple he had spoken of was his body.” (John 2:19, 21).

21 Luther comments: “we read in the Gospel of King Herod that he took his brother's wife while he was yet living. […] But such an example, I trust, will not occur among us, because in the New Testament those who are married are forbidden to be divorced.” See fn. 15.
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10. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. In another case of word-painting, theme 10 becomes shorter and shorter in this section as if something were diminished or scattered. Finally, the theme is reduced to its cross-like initial motive. As in the case of commandments 5 and 8, the appearance of the cross figure may contain another allusion to the Passion: “They divided up his clothes by casting lots” (Matthew 27:35).

Example 14. Shortening of Theme 10

One sees that solutions that previously appeared to be inconsistent and haphazard become meaningful if seen in connection with the individual commandments. Anomalies and oddities like the “inactive” third theme, No. 9 presented in pairs, or No. 10 getting shorter and shorter, can be explained. Moreover, it is striking that several of the commandments (Nos. 5, 8, and 10) become linked to the person of Jesus in this way, outlining an imaginary Passion story. This is true even of the Fourth Commandment, where the special love due to the Father is presented from the Son’s perspective.

I noted earlier that there is an important reason for the reversed order of the last two commandments, and that the circular, labyrinthine structure of the fugue defies a linear traversal. These characteristics may be explained if one realizes that the pared-down cross motive of theme 10\(^\text{22}\) leads to the next circle—back to the beginning of the fugue.

As it was in the beginning…

As the discussion of the Second Commandment and the second theme has shown, the theme is not articulated at that point; it is not uttered or made fully manifest. Yet almost everything in this ricercar happens at the level of the motives, as Anton Webern made amply clear in his congenial orchestration. What is surprising is that the “Webernesque” fragmentation of the themes originated with Bach himself. What seems like the last splinters of theme 10 in the final phase of the work (measure 197ff.) is in reality the fragmentation of the beginning of theme 2 (measures 17–19). In other words, what we see at this moment is the development of the cross-figures inherent in theme 2; it is here that the religious significance of those figures becomes explicit.

\(^{22}\) The Roman numeral X is itself cross-shaped!
Two circumstances make the discovery of this thematic identity more difficult: first, the great distance between the two segments within the work (they are 180 measures apart), and second, the written-out ornamentation at the beginning of theme 2 which is a small matter, yet sufficient to divert our attention.

This singular reprise harks back to the opening in a most striking way, reactivating even the passive, “restful” theme 3. In a slightly modified form, this theme joins the royal theme in measure 199 (Example 15).

Is it possible that this formal structure conceals a special message, or is it merely a thematic condensation, one often seen in Bach’s works, albeit realized here in a unique way? It is hard to decide, but I submit that we are here in the presence of one of the most important prayers of the Church, namely the Lesser Doxology, the glorification of the Holy Trinity.

Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto,
sicut erat in principio, et nunc et semper
et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now
and will be for ever and ever, Amen.

This brief prayer appears at the end of three compositions by Bach: Cantata 10 (Meine Seel’ erhebt den Herren), where it appears in the form of a chorale; Cantata 191 (Gloria in excelsis Deo), where it repeats the “Cum Sancto Spiritu” movement of the B-minor Mass.
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(BWV 232/11);\textsuperscript{23} and the Magnificat (BWV 243/12), where, at the words “as it was in the beginning,” the music of the opening movement is literally recapitulated.

For ever and ever…

The last entrance of the Theme Regium\textsuperscript{24} is accompanied not only by the four cross-shaped patterns mentioned above. The entrance is preceded by three inverted cross-patterns in the three upper voices, followed by ten more cross-entrances for a total of 13. An experienced Bach scholar would begin to wonder why the number is not 14, which is so important in the late works, almost to the point of obsession. (As shown above, this number refers not only to Bach’s name but also to the symbology of the “A and Ω,” the beginning and the end.)

Sure enough, the fourteenth cross does appear after all. At the “Omega” point of the composition, the Royal Theme is transformed; while the octave break in its final melodic segment seems to do no more than create a usual cadential closure, in reality it is the Royal Theme that is “broken,” resulting in the fourteenth cross symbolizing the Omega.

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Example16.png}
\end{center}

Example 16. Last Entrance of the Royal Theme with 14 Cross Figures

\textsuperscript{23} This is the conclusion of the Great Doxology.

\textsuperscript{24} Here the eighth-note motion is almost completely abandoned and the affect becomes solemn and austere. In measures 202–203, a paradoxical acoustic situation arises, with apparent parallel fifths and octaves in the inner four voices. Although the voice crossings technically obviate the parallels, this makes no audible difference on a keyboard instrument. While our attention is drawn to the harsh dissonances, the austere effect of the archaic, organum-like parallels still remains.
This symbol, referring to the Eucharist, is hard to miss.\textsuperscript{25} It is equally striking that Luther’s Catechism begins with the Ten Commandments and proceeds to the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the sacrament of Baptism before concluding with the Last Supper. It is well known that the third volume of the \textit{Clavier-Übung} is based on Luther’s Catechism; the same text underlies the six-part ricercar as well, with uncommon intensity.

Recent studies of the \textit{Musical Offering} agree on the religious character of the cycle.\textsuperscript{26} Yet, as the above comments have shown, several details stand in need of correction. As far as the issue of genre is concerned, the six-part ricercar resists any categorization. On the strength of its dramaturgy, it can be seen as a fugue on the subject of the Decalogue, while the astonishing number of themes, motives, quotations and self-references makes it a kind of grandiose quodlibet. It is also an imaginary Passion, a musical pilgrimage,\textsuperscript{27} and a labyrinth.

The \textit{Offering}, thus, acquires a new meaning in addition to all the previous ones: it is an \textit{offering} in the truest and most complete Christian sense, the offering of the Cross.

In keeping with Bach’s intentions, the \textit{Thema Regium} belongs not only to King Frederick but to another King as well, the one above whose head “they placed the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{center}
\textit{Christus Coronabit Crucigeros}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{25} It appears most explicitly in 1 Cor 11:23–24: “The Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, ‘Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.’”

\textsuperscript{26} “It is no less intriguing that, while appearing as a secular work addressed to a gallant, progressive king, \textit{Musical Offering} cannot hide its theological religious layers, appearing, above all, in connection with the double ricercars, especially with the second one and its strong associations with the entire compositional gesture—that of offertory, offering, \textit{Opfer}.” (Ruth HaCohen, “Exploring the Limits: the Tonal, the Gestural, and the Allegorical in Bach’s \textit{Musical Offering}” in \textit{Understanding Bach}, I, [Bach Network UK, 2006] 26).\textsuperscript{http://www.bachnetwork.co.uk/ub1/hacohen1.pdf}

\textsuperscript{27} The original melody of Luther’s Decalogue chorales was a folk hymn sung by pilgrims. See Leaver, \textit{Luther’s Liturgical Music}, 118.

\textsuperscript{28} Matthew 27:37 (\textit{St. Matthew Passion}, BWV 244/67).