

We will now treat in detail a structurally key, and at the same time very dramatic passage of this work (measures 63 and following). This fragment will be considered under the form of a dialogue between the appoggiatura motive, “pain” (the human), and the arpeggio motive, “serenity” (the divine). We will treat this dialogue considering the interventions of the speakers, one by one, and analyzing the semantic implications of each one of them. The dialogue begins with a modified reappearance of the arpeggio motive:

Example 27:

The modification consists in the counterpointal inversion, that is, the upper voice becomes the middle one, and vice versa. Note that this motive only uses the second half of the subject, which would be referring to faith, to affirmation. It seems that Bach is telling us that in ourselves (subject) is also the divine (2nd half of subject), and our pain or compassion (appoggiatura motive) may be a somewhat distorted reflection of divine love (initial half of the arpeggio motive, designated with A on example 24). This is answered by the appoggiatura motive:

Example 28:

The motive will appear almost always in modulation, which implies an emotional mobility appropriate to the human; in this case, the modulation is from tonic to dominant. The passage of tonic to dominant tends to increase the tension, as the jump in register does, and the second half of the example should be performed with this in mind. Note that here Bach makes this motive appear by itself, while it was always accompanying other motives in the first section of the Fugue.

We can continue this semantic contemplation of the dialogue, thinking that human pain talks to the divine, maybe in an imploration. The answer, given by the arpeggio motive, signals that the prayer was heard, answering with the same phrase of example 27, and recognizing the modulation to the dominant proposed by the human speaker. This recognition, accepting the proposed new key, is a semantically very effective rhetorical resource:

Example 29:

But the appoggiatura motive answers in an extraordinary and unpredictable way. It begins by reaffirming the dominant, saying something like “yes, this is true” (note the jump of register that makes this acceptance seem almost a cry), and this is followed by a most painful modulation to the minor subdominant, descending in register. There does not seem to be a clearer way of saying: “Lord, I believe in your perfection and your love, but I have so much pain!”. The modulation to minor reinforces the sorrowful expression inherent to this motive.

Example 30:



The answer of the arpeggio motive is still more extraordinary. It begins with the same note in which the pain motive ended, which as we have already seen implies “having heard the message”, and develops a sequence in which we may find the trace of the subject:

Example 31:

The original text of the passage appears in the upper system, and in the lower, the motivic fragments extracted from the text. Note in A the relationship between the sequential figuration and the subject. The five terms of the sequence (marked with dotted brackets) would correspond to the human, and the descent of the sequence symbolizes the humanization of the divine. In B, the second half of the subject (“faith”) begins to be quoted literally. In C, the divine speaker expresses compassion, quoting literally the appoggiatura motive. I would like to say something about the three repeated notes: first, its meaning is not only numerological (read in this key, it would signify the divine); second, Bach superposes it to the “pain” motive, the most human emotion we can imagine; and third, the three repeated notes are one more of Bach’s favorite mottoes: “Christus Coronabit Crucigeres”⁹. In the extraordinary fragment E, Bach manages to put to use at the same time the second half of the fugue’s subject, the “faith” motive, and also the basic cell (D)¹⁰ transposed first on the bass, and then twice, in diminution, in the upper voice.

Proceeding with our interpretation, we don’t need to make a great imaginative effort to see in this passage a musical representation of the Christian mystery of the Incarnation of Christ: almost before our ears, the “divine” becomes “human”.