

Artistic reflection – written part

I chose to present the artistic reflection of the project in 3 parts: (i) this written part, (ii) an interpretation tableau and (iii) audio files (recorded together with the Leipzig-based vocal ensemble Calmus). The audio files, with the help of the tableau, is the main and the most informative part of the reflection part. Listening to it in parallel to reading the tableau, where I share my findings, readings, texts and musical references, gives the best insight into my way of thinking and communicates the reflection aspect of the artistic result.

In this project I sought to get new insights into the interpretational process, to make a contribution to the renewal of methods of working with a musical text, to find a new way to communicate meaning found in music, to broaden the role of the pianist to a co-creative one, and to unfold a new facet of the understanding of the Well-Tempered Clavier by J. S. Bach.

Bach wrote that “the aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul” (Spitta, 1738/1880; in Gerner, 2021). He is perhaps the composer that with the greatest intensity and integrity opens the door to the spiritual world. Sharing the composer’s existential convictions and his spiritual universe, I try in my artistic result to tell the story of my personal understanding of this iconic piece, often called the pianist’s Bible. The story presented is not merely a descriptive Bible story, *but rather a personal reflection over our existence.*

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of J. S. Bach’s Well Tempered Clavier¹ for the development of Western art music in general and for pianists particularly. The preludes and fugues from the WTC are a compulsory component in the piano program of all professional music education institutions and serious piano competitions, and they are played by amateurs as well as famous concert pianists. Bach wrote the set of 24 preludes and fugues “for the benefit and use of musical youth desirous of knowledge as well as those who are already advanced in this study”². One may say it was meant rather as an exercise book than a concert piece.

It was only during the 19th century that the WTC found its way to concert halls and since then and until our days there have been many intense discussions and very little consensus on how to play the piece, with everything from playing in a very romantic and dramatic way (with exaggerated agogic, with a lot of pedal, thick legato sound, long phrasing, and huge dynamic development) to a very puritanical way, strictly to the rules of the German baroque epoch. Some musicians would from the very start dismiss my idea of performing it on a modern piano, since such an instrument did not exist at the time. The use of pedal, articulation, execution of ornamentations and so on, are still hot topics. All this is quite understandable because when you open the score of the piece you find a huge space of creativity for the performer: no notation of dynamic, articulation, phrasing, tempo (only one, the last B minor prelude and fugue has tempo indications). Additionally, you have the elements which are impossible to notate and always leave space for the creative process of the pianist: agogic, timbre, touché. The title itself (the appropriately tuned keyboard

¹ In this project I refer to WTC Book 1.

² As noted in the preface of the first edition.

instrument) does not give any strong indication of the intended instrument as well. All these discussions mostly refer to the formal aspects of performing. In my project, I wanted to approach all these formal issues through the prism of what could be understood as an internal semantic world of this music.

The initial inspiration for this project came from the theory of the Ukrainian-born musicologist and pianist Boleslaw Javorsky (1877-1942), whose main idea can be formulated as: the main foundation of the Well-Tempered Clavier is the protestant chorales, and the WTC is an artistic interpretation of images and plots of the Bible (Berchenko, 2008).

Of course, because of this theory and Javorsky's work on this topic he was banned in the deeply atheistic Soviet Union, which is why we cannot find any of his published and printed works today. Although he was banned, and despite the professional isolation of the last 15 years of his life, he gave many open seminars on the subject, possibly expressing in this veiled way his spiritual rejection of the Soviet reality. In his book *In Search of Lost Meaning*, Roman Berchenko (2008) made a thorough compilation and summarization of all the extant writings by Javorsky, as well as of other texts (e.g., the student notebooks). The most important statements of Javorsky's research argumentation, along with a very brief explanation of each point can be found in the Appendix.

Another statement that influenced me strongly was by Albert Schweitzer (1908/1960), who wrote that many pieces of WTC start to speak if you understand the meaning of the motives similar to the motives in the works with text.

The use of metaphors, images and narrative is important as a way of working with music for many musicians. For me this way of thinking has always been the most important working method, along with the wide range of other elements within my individual working processes, which inform my artistic practice. The intention was to go further and through the creative process during this project develop a new methodological approach in working with the music text. I call the process *in search for meaning in preludes and fugues*.

My working process began with trying to find more or less pure quotations³ of a chorale in the complex musical text, trying to understand the connection between words in that chorale and the music text and let this understanding be the deciding factor of all other elements of my professional pianistic practice and of all the formal aspects of the interpretation, to transform these findings through my own personality, my own internal transformer. I would like to note that the prosody-rhetorical approach, that is the linguistic aspect of music, (which I think is a very important supporting element in working on how to build the natural phrase, and I very often use it when I teach students) is *not* the aspect I investigate in this project. The main focus is to explore the pure semantic connection between words and music.

Below, I would like to give some insights into the beginning of the working process and share a few examples of my findings and how they influence practical pianistic aspects.

³ I do not use the term quotation in the strict literal sense as in an exact citation. but rather when it is easy to recognize the body of the melody.

I started with the piece where I could very easily recognize in the musical texture a first motive of the chorale *Wo soll ich fliehen hin* [Where should I flee] (the same tune as *Auf meine liebe Gott*) - prelude in F minor (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The chorale *Wo soll ich fliehen hin*.

The English translation of the text of the chorale is:

Where should I flee from you,
Since I am burden with many great sins,
Where can I rescue,
If everybody in the world came to my help,
They would not take away my anguish.

In the music score I circled notes which refer to the melody of the chorale. In Figure 2 I show an example of the first phrase.

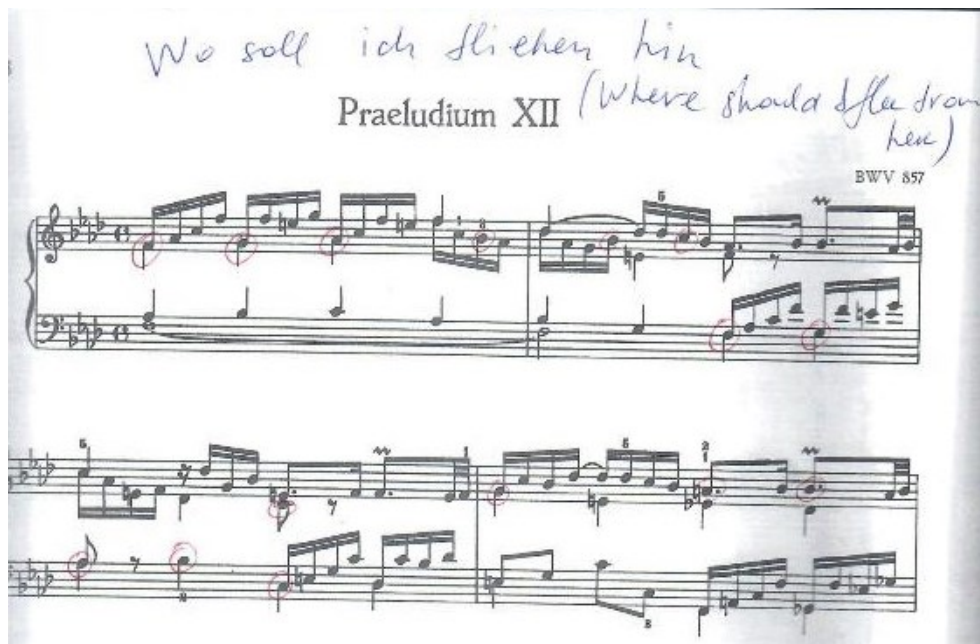


Figure 2. First phrase of the chorale in prelude in F minor.

Later, working with the piece, I found three other dimensions of the same chorale, as shown in Figure 3.

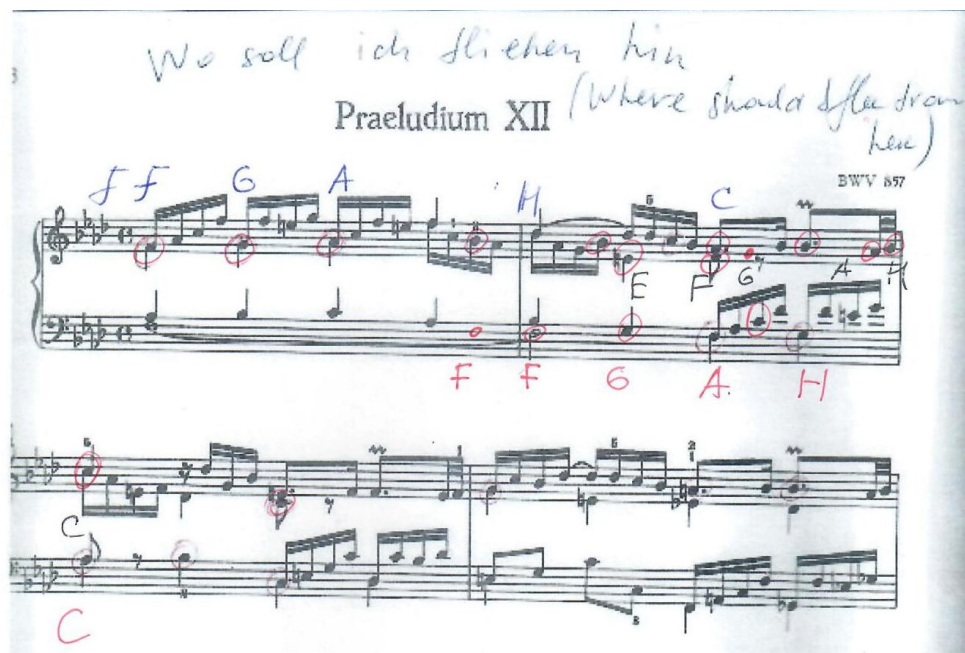


Figure 3. Three layers of the first phrase of the chorale in prelude in F minor

The motive of the chorale seems to permeate all the music texture. The words of the text confer to the *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord, have a mercy on me) context. When looking at the *Kyrie Eleison* part in H moll Messe BWV 232 no. 3 I found less obvious but very strong parallels with the fugue from the same cycle (the chromatic beginning of the subject, the same graphic movement of the motive, the notation of the subject with quarter notes, the same number of

voices etc.). I was struck by the strong semantical connection between prelude and fugue as two parts of one whole.

When working with the D major set, I had the same wow-experience. In the texture of the fugue, I could rather clearly hear the motive of the chorale *Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan/What God does that is done well*. When I looked at the music texture of the prelude as an arrangement of the chorale in a way Bach often arranges chorales in his cantatas – splitting the verses, having long instrumental interludes between them, adding complex instrumental layers to the long notes in the melody etc. – I found that the chorale fits perfectly to the prelude. Together they seem to semantically form a holistic entity. Those findings gave me an understanding of the general character of the piece, which in turn defined the choice of tempo, articulation, and first of all and most important – touché.

In some pieces the result of this influence is rather radical and “shocking” (according to one of my friends) in relation to the tradition of interpretation, as for example in the fugue in C sharp minor or in the F sharp major set, which I would like to describe in more detail.

The prelude in F sharp major is written as a two-part invention and is traditionally played in a light gracious dance-like manner, with a lot of ornamentations which brings to the mind the genre of French suite dances. The fugue is usually played with a robust subject, which later meets a bouncing second theme. After investigating for quite a long time I found in the fugue’s subject a rather clear similarity with the Bach’s arrangement of the funeral chorale *Alla Menschen müssen sterben/Everybody must die*:

Alle Menschen müssen sterben	<i>Everybody must die</i>
Was da lebet, wird verderben	<i>Whatever lives must perish</i>
Soll es anders werden neu	<i>It is to become new elsewhere</i>
Dieser Leib, der muss verwesen	<i>This body must rot</i>
Wenn er ewig soll genesen	<i>If it is elsewhere to recover</i>
Zu der großen Herrlichkeit,	<i>And gain the great glory</i>
Die den Frommen ist bereit	<i>Which is prepared for the righteous</i>

This totally changes the perception of the general character of the piece. Another finding was that the countersubject of the fugue is almost a pure quotation of the cello part from the duet for soprano and alto from the cantata *Jesu, der du meine Seele*, where the words are: “We hurry to you with weak but eager steps” (Figure 4 and 5).



Figure 4. The second subject of the fugue in F sharp major



Figure 5. Cantata BWV 78 “Jesu, der du meine Seele” no.2 (cello part)

Afterwards, an extremely fun period of experimentation followed playing with the two semantically opposite subjects: death and life. The first in my opinion requests soft sound, slower tempo, legato and solemn contemplative intonation, the second - short articulation, faster tempo, and a light and cheerful touch of the fingers. How to combine them in a practical way became quite a challenge, because if one of them would define all the formal issues, then the expression of the other would suffer and the whole concept would disappear. So, when the *life* theme comes, straight before the words "it is to become new elsewhere" I chose to change the tempo but to keep the character of the reflective-contemplative theme with sound colour, legato and intonation. My favourite moment is when, after the promise of getting "the great glory...for the righteous", two different expressions with different articulation, colour sound and touché get together in the extremely beautiful interlude.

When working with the prelude, I found less obvious but, in my opinion, very strong parallels with the first piece of Bach's chorale cantata *Liebster Gott*: quasi lullaby three-bit pace, the same harmonic development, timbral similarities illustrating birds' singing, major key etc. The text is a reflection on death:

Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben?
Meine Zeit läuft immer hin,
Und des alten Adams Erben,
Unter denen ich auch bin,
Haben dies zum Vater teil,
Dass sie eine kleine Weil
Arm und elend sein auf Erden
Und den selber Erde werden.

*Dearest God, when shall I die?
My time runs continually away
And the heirs of old Adam,
Among whom I also am included,
Inherit this from their father
That they for a short while
Are poor and wretched on earth
And then themselves become earth.*

This invited to a reconsideration not only of tempo, sound character, intonation, but also ornamentation. I chose to replace the trill (which in my opinion was used during that period in order to prolong the long notes, which died almost instantly on the period instruments) with the, for me, more meaningful repetition of the tone, as it is in Bach's arrangement of the chorale - staccato repetition of the transverse flute. I would like to note that I consciously chose to skip the ornamentation in many of the pieces. Partly because, as explained above, I think that most of the ornamentations refer to the limitations of the instruments of the period, but also, I wanted to keep the texture plain and clean from all the decorations in order to draw the attention of a listener to the melodic expression of the found meaning. I chose to play trills and other ornamentations only where I use them as an expressive tool to communicate the image, like for example in the prelude in F major (*O ewiges Feuer/O eternal fire*).

In the compositional way of working with the pieces, that is in the co-creative process, I played rather freely with single music phrases of all the vocal works, as well as with words, combining words from different verses in a way so that it would express my personal reflections and messages. For example, the text of prelude in F sharp major became like this:

Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben?

My dearest God, when will I die?

Meine Zeit läuft immer hin
Ich verzeih es gern der Welt
dass sie alles hier behält
und bescheide meinen Erben
einen Gott, der nicht kan sterben

*My time runs continually away,
I willingly resign to the world
Everything here to keep,
And choose for my inheritance
A God who cannot die*

Those semantic lines that bind together the preludes and fugues of one set, confirms to me my understanding of each cycle as a one holistic piece, in contrast to, for example, the statement of Glenn Gould⁴, who told that a lot of fugues are better off without their preludes and vice versa (Monsaingeon, 1982).

The findings in prelude and fugue in F sharp major gave me an idea to look further for parallels with other works of Bach, not explicitly based on a choral melody: cantatas arias, oratorios, passions, and I started to use this as a helping element in the search for my interpretation. Sometimes it is a clear quotation of a motive, like for example almost all the motives in the fugue in B minor, but other times my attention was caught by just very strong parallels in pace, music texture, harmonical development and so on.

There are two pieces which I always had a very special connection to, and both put me in the same state of mind: prelude in E flat minor and soprano aria *Aus liebe* from St. Matthew Passion. Except for this similarity, which is more difficult to define and articulate, it is easy to note more formal resemblances. First of all in music texture: an even, quasi heartbeat pace and free melody with the same timbral colour. Also, the parallels in harmonical development of single phrases are not difficult to recognise. Those two pieces merge into each other very naturally and this finding strengthened my previous understanding of the prelude and pianistic interpretation of it.

In other cases, applying the same method, the finding defined the interpretation. For example, the words in the soprano aria from cantata BWV 127 "Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' mensch und Gott" (*Lord Jesus Christ, true God and man*) gave key to the interpretation of prelude in B flat minor, which became kind of a funeral march:

Die Seele ruht
In Jesu Händen

*The soul rests
In Jesus' hands*

As mentioned above, my interpretation of the fugue in C sharp minor is probably one of the most unconventional in relation to the tradition of interpretation. It is in my opinion one of the most complex and difficult pieces in the whole WTC- three subjects, five voices and a very complex form, which can be divided into three parts. My first aim was to find references to all three subjects and see where it would lead me. Ambiguity appeared already in the first subject, as one can clearly hear in it motives of both the chorale *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland* (which is the Advent song) and *Crucify!* from St. Matthew and St. John Passions. Letting one of those motives define the understanding of the whole piece didn't convince me, so I went

⁴ Please see Gould's thoughts about Preludes and Fugues around 26:00 min.

on looking for the reference to the second subject and found almost the exact quotation in Christmas Oratorio, in trio for soprano, alto and tenor (Figure 6 and 7):

Jesu ach! So komm zu mir

Jesus come to me



Figure 6. The second subject of fugue in C sharp minor



Figure 7. Fragment from BWV 248/51 trio for soprano, alt and tenor

The semantic relation to the *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland* chorale seemed obvious, and the musical expression of the second subject, with quavers after the choral-like first part in semibreve and minim, stress the eagerness of waiting.

I found the reference to the third subject in the last part of cantata *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*, in the Christmas chorale “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern” (*How lovely shines the Morning Star*; Figure 8 and 9):

Komm, komm du schöne Freudenkrone

Come, you beautiful crown of joy



Figure 8. The third subject of fugue in C sharp minor



Figure 9. Fragment from cantata BWV 61 no.6 „Nun komm der Heiden Heiland“

As the Morning Star in the Bible text refers to Jesus (Revelation 22:16), all these findings pointed in one direction. But I couldn't ignore the explicitness of the *Crucify!* motive in the main subject. Moreover, I found quotations of two other motives with the same word from St. John Passion (Figure 10): in counterpoint of the second part, leading to the most expressive entrance of the first subject in the bass (chromatic tetrachords in bars 67-73) and in the counterpoint of the third part, where the second subject with even quavers disappears, and the musical texture becomes more dramatic (bars 95-97 and 104-105; Figure 10).



Figure 10. Fragment from St. John Passion BWV 245 no.21

Reflecting on those findings together with analysing the form and the texture of the piece (the first part reminding of the singing of a chorale in a church, the second building up and leading with eager quavers to the third, with dramatic expressive texture), brought me to the perception of the fugue as the carrier of the essence of the whole story, from waiting for the Saviour to His crucifixion, blurring the boundaries between, and merging those concepts. I reached the conclusion that not only such pianistic aspects as colour of sound, articulation, dynamics, but also tempo need to be transformed along the way, to express the sense of my conception. I personally think that change of tempo as an expressive means is the simplest way to go and I usually try not to use this effect much in my playing generally. Also, in my teaching I always encourage students to use touché, intonation, phrasing, colour of sound as an expressive means rather than tempo and dynamic, but in these two cases – the fugue in C sharp minor and the fugue in F sharp major - I think it justifies the musical and semantical purpose.

By experimenting with interweaving the chorales (almost all of them in the version as Bach transformed them in his vocal works) and other motives from Bach's cantatas, oratorios, passions etc., with the music texture of WTC, I wanted to not only make my understanding of the genesis of the work audible, but also to embed my reflections into my playing. It also broadened the role of the pianist to a more co-creative one, which was the common practice in Bach's time, but in an entirely different way. In other words, my intention was to make my interpretation historically informed, but to be faithful to the spirit of the time, rather than to the letter of the time.

Because of the strong connection with words every prelude and fugue get a clear semantic interpretation and a clear meaning. I therefore decided to put all the pieces chronologically based on the found meaning instead of the formal C major, C minor etc. In this way, the entire WTC becomes a unified coherent story instead of a collection of 48 separate pieces.

I have to note that Bach didn't use in his works the chorales that I use as a reference for preludes in C major, E flat major and prelude and fugue in C minor. I found them in the old *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch* (1986)⁵, and one can easily hear the strong connection with the pieces above. They are the popular German protestant chorales from the beginning of the 17th century and broadly used in the services even in our days, so one can almost certainly guess that Bach was very familiar with them.

Concerning the prelude in E minor, I did find parallels with Bach's vocal work, but they were less explicit. Therefore, I found it rather artificial to experiment with interweaving it with the

⁵ The *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch* is a protestant church songbook with content dating back to the time of and before J. S. Bach.

music texture. Nevertheless, the parallels were strong enough to connect the image to the music.

I didn't find any obvious parallels with the chorales or Bach's vocal music in the preludes in D minor and A minor. However, given the knowledge of my previous findings concerning the unity between preludes and their fugues and considering my intuitive interpretation of all the other elements of the music texture I could get a rather clear understanding of the pieces and be able to connect them with the text from Bible.

In one case, in the A major set, I could not find any clear parallels with either chorales or other vocal music. In this case I had to rely on my experience, intuition, and creativity within the context.

The legendary Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer (1908/1960) wrote about the WTC: "What is gripping, is not the shape, or the structure of the pieces, but the worldview reflected in them". To make my understanding of this worldview audible to all listeners, and to invite them to immerse themselves into Bach's spiritual universe (where the music's aim is the "recreation of the spirit"), is the overall goal of the project. Bach's faith generated his music, and so I hope that this music can in turn generate faith, which we need in our current times more than ever.

References

The Tableaux

Please note that all English translations of the original German-language Bach cantatas in the Tableaux has been downloaded from the following website:

<https://www.bach-cantatas.com/Texts/index.htm>. Retrieved 2022-11-18.

Music score

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Non-referenced literature provided as reading list

The below, non-referenced reading list was part of my study in this project, and is included as a courtesy to those interested in the studying Bach.

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Appendix

The most important statements of Javorsky's research argumentation (based on the book *In search of the lost meaning* by R. Berchenko (2008), as a second source) are listed below, along with a very brief explanation of each point:

1. The aesthetics of the époque/period.

During Bach's time even worldly music, as well as poetry, art, engravings, songs and other secular forms of art, were all nearly connected with biblical themes. The connection between the WTC and biblical themes was natural for the tradition of that époque.

2. The main foundation of the WTC is the Protestant chorales

Bach's life and oeuvre are inextricably connected with the Protestant chorales, both because of his personal convictions and because of his job as a church musician. So it is quite natural that the Protestant chorales became an integral component of his musical language. People sang chorales in churches, and they knew all the melodies by heart. The melodies had such a strong associative connection with certain semantics that they became signs reflecting the content of the chorales.

(In his essay *Bach the Tone Poet* Hans Rosenwald (1950, p.49) wrote: "Realize what a chorale meant in the life of a churchgoer at St. Thomas of Leipzig, for instance, where Bach was a cantor. Consider what this churchgoer would associate with a chorale, and you will understand Bach's specific use of it /.../ Taking it for granted that almost every listener knew these chorales, we know that his association was by no means unconscious, that, as a matter of fact, these quotations directed his thoughts into definite channels")

3. The use of musical symbols and rhetorical figures helps us to better understand the semantic world of the WTC.

The musical *lexicon* of rhetorical figures grew out of the close connection between music and word. German composers in particular saw the word as a helpful instrument in musical invention. It inspired composers to invent new expressive figures (rhetoric). Lack of words in instrumental music combined with the striving to use musical language as expressively as possible became a driving force to use figures more intensively. Whereas the text carries the semantic meaning in vocal music, in instrumental music this information is carried by the figures, which have more or less certain semantics (e.g., *interrogatio* – question [second up]; *exclamatio* - exclamation [sixth up], or *passus duriusculus* – the chromatic turn which is used to express suffering). The knowledge of rhetoric including a system of musical-rhetoric figures was a necessity for a church musician. Musical figures which were known and understandable for church people had a very important place in the service.

4. The WTC is very closely connected to Bach's spiritual works with words (i.e., passions, masses, cantatas, oratories).

(Schweitzer (1908/1960) noted that many pieces from the WTC become alive if you understand the meaning of the different motives which are used in Cantatas with words).

5. All preludes and fugues of the WTC combine into some inner circles according to the main themes of the Evangelium.

Javorsky's interesting ideas have started to reach the West. A short summary of the book *In search of the lost meaning* by Berchenko (2008) has been translated to English and is available in the Bach library in Leipzig. Further, the Vancouver-based piano teacher Svetlana Ponomarëva presented the ideas of Javorsky in the book "Touching a Mystery" as a pedagogical application to children's music school repertoire.

Interestingly, other Bach researchers have approached WTC in a somewhat similar way. Independent of Javorsky, the Finnish composer and music researcher Jouko Tolonen (1971) also thought that Protestant chorale is the foundation of the music of WTC. Also, the German violin professor, Helga Thoene, analyzed quotations of chorale Christ lag in Todesbanden in Chaconne from Partita in A-minor for Violin solo. Like Javorsky, she assumed a connection between the latter piece and the chorale, but she used a different method which had to do with Bach's fascination for numbers. Although much could probably be said about her approach and analysis from a musicological perspective, the musical result led to the CD "Morimur" which entered the American Billboard classical chart at No. 10, as No. 1 on a German classical chart and it was briefly No. 3 on Amazon.com's list of best-selling records overall (behind Britney Spears and Enya, Ostreich, 2001).