

Baroque spiritual heritage: Religious aspects in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and his contemporaries

Herança espiritual barroca: aspectos religiosos na música de Johann Sebastian Bach e seus contemporâneos



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Abstract: The study aims to reveal the influence of religious faith on musical compositions by analyzing the structure, symbolism, and use of biblical texts in Baroque sacred music. The works' musical and theological contexts were used to reveal their significance for the contemporary listener. The role of Protestant and Catholic traditions as sacred music genres, such as masses, motets, cantatas, passions, and oratorios, was emphasized the structure of musical compositions, symbolism, and connection with liturgical texts and religious practice were analyzed in detail. For instance, in Bach's work, his religious convictions and Lutheran faith were reflected in complex polyphonic compositions, where using biblical texts and Protestant chorales became a means of spiritual education and musical service. The works of his contemporaries, such as G.F. Handel and D. Buxtehude, who, similarly to Bach, used religious texts and symbolism to create profound spiritual works that affected listeners on an emotional and theological level, are also explored. In his oratorios, including Messiah, Händel-Werke-Verzeichnis 56,

and Israel in Egypt, G.F. Handel skilfully combined dramatic musical forms with biblical stories to create epic works that emphasize the greatness of God. The study also explored the influence of Baroque sacred music on classical and romantic music in subsequent eras. The study demonstrates that Baroque sacred music profoundly impacts musical culture today, retaining its relevance and influence on religious perception.

Keywords: symbolism. reformation. counter-reformation. cantata. passione.

Resumo: O estudo visa revelar a influência da fé religiosa nas composições musicais, em particular, analisar a estrutura, o simbolismo e o uso de textos bíblicos na música sacra barroca. Os contextos musicais e teológicos das obras foram usados para revelar seu significado para o ouvinte contemporâneo. O papel das tradições protestantes e católicas como gêneros de música sacra, como missas, motetos, cantatas, paixões e oratórios, foi enfatizado. A estrutura das composições musicais, o simbolismo e a conexão com textos litúrgicos e práticas religiosas foram analisados em detalhes. Por exemplo, na obra de Bach, suas convicções religiosas e sua fé luterana foram refletidas em composições polifônicas complexas, onde o uso de textos bíblicos e corais protestantes se tornou um meio de educação espiritual e serviço musical. As obras de seus contemporâneos, como G.F. Handel e D. Buxtehude, que, similarmente a Bach, usaram textos religiosos e simbolismo para criar obras espirituais profundas que afetaram os ouvintes em um nível emocional e teológico, também são exploradas. Em seus oratórios, incluindo *Messiah*, *Händel-Werke-Verzeichnis 56* e *Israel in Egypt*, Handel combinou habilmente formas musicais dramáticas com histórias bíblicas para criar obras épicas que enfatizam a grandeza de Deus. O estudo também explorou a influência da música sacra barroca em eras subsequentes, na música clássica

e romântica. Os resultados do estudo demonstram que a música sacra barroca tem um impacto profundo na cultura musical até hoje, mantendo sua relevância e influência na percepção religiosa.

Palavras-chave: simbolismo. reforma. contrarreforma. cantata. passione.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary musicological thought focuses on how religious music was formed and existed in the Baroque period. During this era, when Baroque aesthetics reached its height, J.S. Bach and his contemporaries composed music intended for artistic pleasure and spiritual upliftment. J.S. Bach's music, filled with religious symbolism and profound theological ideas, remains the subject of numerous studies today. However, despite the considerable research, certain aspects require additional analysis, such as the influence of religious traditions on the structure and symbolism of musical works.

The problem that emerged while studying this topic is that the study of the religious aspects of Baroque music, namely the work of J.S. Bach, is often limited to musical analysis without due attention to theological contexts—many studies, such as by B. Varwig (2022) and M. Rathey (2022) focuses on the musical structure and socio-cultural context of J.S. Bach's works but does not explore their religious content and spiritual influence on the society of the time in depth. Moreover, studies of J.S. Bach's late works in the context of the Protestant tradition that so strongly influenced his work remain underdeveloped. An essential task of this study was to fill in the gaps in understanding the spiritual heritage of the Baroque and how J.S. Bach's religious beliefs influenced his music. Many researchers have contributed significantly to studying the spiritual works of J.S. Bach and his contemporaries. M. Ringer (2021), M.A. Peters and R.L. Sanders (2020) addressed J.S. Bach's vocal works, exploring them to convey religious ideas. They highlight how J.S. Bach embodied Protestant theological thought through his cantatas and motets. Similarly, M. Marissen (2023) traced the connection between theological concepts and the composer's musical language. However, these works focus on the musical aspect, omitting the deeper cultural and theological contexts.

P.N. Skrine (2023) and C. Wolff (2020) significantly contributed to the understanding of J.S. Bach's musical universe, focusing on his creative process, artistic thinking, and the influence of the cultural context of the era. P.N. Skrine highlights the significance of seventeenth-century religious culture. Still, his study focuses more on the literary and general cultural aspects of the time than an in-depth analysis of the theological foundations of J.S. Bach's music. C. Wolff emphasized the importance of the composer's musical forms and techniques, acknowledging the presence of religious symbolism in J.S. Bach's works but not focusing on their theological content. Nevertheless, their research is valuable as it provides an overview of the cultural and historical context of J.S. Bach's times, although they do not address the theological aspects sufficiently. Another critical problem is that although much attention is paid to J.S. Bach's works, his contemporaries often remain understudied. Authors such as C. Walker et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of studying religious influences on other Baroque composers who significantly shaped the musical culture of that era. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate to what extent religious beliefs and Protestant traditions influenced the musical structure and symbolism of the works of J.S. Bach and his contemporaries. By analyzing J.S. Bach's works in the context of his faith, as well as those of his contemporaries such as G.F. Handel and G.P. Telemann, it is possible to determine how the religious heritage of the Baroque was reflected in the music and how these works influenced listeners.

One of the key aspects that requires further study is the symbolic use of biblical texts in J.S. Bach's works. Following M. Dirst (2024), J.S. Bach did not just use religious texts but reinterpreted them through music, creating new layers of meaning. However, studying how biblical texts shaped the structure and content of cantatas and oratorios remains underdeveloped. An analysis of this question can reveal how music became a means of spiritual communication between the composer and the audience. In addition, it is worth addressing the significance of Protestant

chorales in the work of J.S. Bach. Protestant chorales played a central role in the Lutheran liturgy, where they served as musical accompaniment and an essential means of joint prayerful praise of God—following M. Maul and A. Nones (2020), chorales served as musical accompaniment to liturgical services and an essential tool for conveying theological ideas. J.S. Bach used chorales as the basis for many of his cantatas, integrating them into complex polyphonic compositions. This allowed listeners without a profound musical education to actively participate in the service and better absorb theological truths. Studying the symbolic use of chorales in the context of the religious liturgy of the time can help to better understand the role of music as a means of religious education and enlightenment and a way for strengthening faith and spiritual identity.

The study explores the relationship between spiritual and theological ideas and their musical interpretation in the Baroque period, specifically in the works of J.S. Bach and his contemporaries. It addresses how religious beliefs and theological concepts were reflected in musical forms, genres, and compositional techniques, as well as the role of music in conveying spiritual experiences and theological ideas in the context of the religious liturgy of the time.

2. Materials and methods

This research methodology was based on a comprehensive approach to studying religious aspects in the musical works of J.S. Bach and his contemporaries, particularly G.F. Handel, D. Buxtehude, and G.P. Telemann. The study analyzed musical works that reflect religious ideas, theological concepts, and their musical interpretation. The study explored how religious faith and theological principles of the Baroque era influenced musical forms, genres, and symbolism.

Particular attention was devoted to the musical context of the time and the theological concepts that shaped the religious culture of the Baroque era. The role of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in the formation of spiritual music and the influence

of these movements on the choice of texts, symbolism, and musical genres was studied. The use of religious symbols and biblical texts in the music of the composers under study has revealed a close connection between religious faith, theological concepts, and musical interpretation of these ideas.

The main task was to analyze the musical works of J.S. Bach, in particular, such essential works as “Matthäus-passion,” “Johannes-Passion,” “Kyrie Eleison,” and the motet “Jesu, meine Freude.” Also, numerous cantatas, among which special attention was paid to the cantatas BWV 4 “Christ lag in Todes Banden” and BWV 140 “Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme” (Klassika, 2023b). These works were selected as key examples of religious music that integrates biblical texts and Protestant chorales into their compositional structures. Particular attention was devoted to the symbolism and structure of musical elements, such as polyphony, tonal contrasts, and symbolic musical phrases that reflect theological concepts. Conveyance of spiritual experiences, religious symbols, and theological ideas such as suffering and salvation was explored.

In addition to J.S. Bach, the study addressed the works of his contemporaries, G.F. Handel, and his oratorios *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt* (Klassika, 2023a). How G.F. Handel used biblical texts to create monumental religious works that combined dramatic musical forms with deep theological content was considered. In analyzing the structure of these oratorios, particular attention was devoted to their use of choral scenes, arias, and recitatives that conveyed Biblical stories and their interpretation through music. This was used to identify the peculiarities of musical expression of religious themes in the context of liturgical services of that time.

The work of D. Buxtehude was also studied, particularly his passions and cantatas, among which the cycle “*Membra Jesu Nostrī*” is considered one of the most famous examples of religious meditation through music (*Cantica sacra*, 2024). The study of his works determined how the composer integrated Latin biblical texts into a complex polyphonic structure to convey profound religious experiences. The use of musical elements, such as repetition and

contrast, to emphasize the tragedy and grandeur of the events associated with the Passion of Christ was examined. The work of G.P. Telemann, who actively worked in cantatas, masses, and oratorios, was considered separately. His approach to combining the traditional Lutheran chorale with new musical forms of the time was analyzed. This analysis revealed how G.P. Telemann adapted religious texts for greater accessibility and integration into contemporary musical styles while retaining the theological content.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Baroque was an era of spiritual uplift in art

The Baroque era, which spanned from the late sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century, was characterized by a complex combination of cultural, social, and religious phenomena that shaped the development of art, music, architecture, and literature. Baroque aesthetics was based on the reaction to the changes caused by the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, which significantly influenced European society and contributed to the formation of new artistic forms (Willis, 2021). This era was a time of heightened religious tension and emotional intensity, which was reflected in artworks that often featured religious themes, complex emotional scenes, and dynamic compositions.

One of the characteristic features of the Baroque was the combination of opposites – dynamism and stability, drama and calmness. Baroque artists actively used the play of light and shadow and complex spatial solutions to achieve maximum emotional impact on the viewer or listener (Andresyuk, 2024). This was especially evident in architecture and music, where artists tried to convey religious exaltation and the inner drama of the human soul. The socio-cultural context of the Baroque was also marked by the growing influence of absolutism when monarchs used art to emphasize their power and grandeur. Notably, the Baroque was an international style that spread throughout Europe, but

it acquired its unique features in each country. For instance, in Italy, the Baroque was focused on splendor and emotion, while in France, it was more sophisticated and classical (Skrine, 2023).

Religion was central in the art and culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially in the context of the European Baroque when church structures actively influenced all spheres of public life. During this period, after the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, religious conflicts escalated, leading to the Church's active intervention in cultural development. Accordingly, art has become one of the main tools for expressing religious ideas to strengthen faith and spiritual values. The Church, particularly the Catholic Church, utilized art as a propaganda tool to restore its spiritual strength following the losses incurred during the Reformation (Barakovic et al., 2020). The artworks became part of large-scale church programs aimed to emphasize the grandeur of religious dogma and emotionally influence believers through visual and musical images. For instance, artists and architects created monumental paintings and temples to increase religious piety and ensure close contact between people and God (Willis, 2021).

Music has also become a key element of religious rituals (Kongyratbay, 2021b; 2021a). Composers actively used religious themes in their works, creating sacred music that reflected religious feelings and beliefs. Cantatas, masses, and oratorios became part of liturgical services, providing aesthetic pleasure and a profound spiritual experience for the audience. Spiritual themes played a key role in Baroque music, reflecting the complex interaction between religion and art. In the context of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when religion was deeply embedded in all aspects of social life, music became a powerful means of conveying theological ideas and spiritual experiences. Baroque music was often devoted to religious themes, and composers used them to express complex emotional states and spiritual searches. One of the most striking examples of sacred music of this period is the work of J.S. Bach. His cantatas, masses, and passions were based on biblical texts and created an emotional bridge between music and the religious experiences of his listeners. J.S. Bach's music reflected the text and interpreted it, giving it new meanings using harmony,

polyphony, and melody (Begbie et al., 2021). Religious ideas were also present in the works of other prominent Baroque composers, such as G.F. Handel and D. Buxtehude. Their oratorios and cantatas used biblical stories as a basis for musical compositions, creating monumental works that emphasized the greatness of God and religious values. G.F. Handel used religious themes in his oratorio "Messiah" to convey profound spiritual ideas, combining musical and literary aspects in a harmonious whole (Walker et al., 2020).

The Reformation, initiated by M. Luther in 1517, brought about radical changes in the religious life of Western Europe, which directly affected church music. M. Luther supported using music in worship but preferred simpler musical forms that the masses could understand. He emphasized the importance of choral works and hymns in the native language, not Latin (Raley, 2022). This created new genres, such as chorales, which became the basis for many of J.S. Bach's works, including his cantatas. The Counter-Reformation, as a reaction of the Catholic Church to the Reformation, also influenced the development of music. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) decided to preserve music in the Catholic liturgy but with specific reforms (Firpo, 2023). Catholic music had to retain its grandeur and solemnity and become more accessible to believers. Composers adapted to these requirements, creating complex but understandable musical forms that preserved polyphony while emphasizing textual and theological content. Baroque music, especially in the works of J.S. Bach, G.F. Handel, and others, successfully combined the features of music that emerged as a result of both religious movements. Lutheran chorales were used alongside the Catholic genres of masses and oratorios, contributing to the further development of European sacred music.

Baroque sacred music is characterized by its complex structure, multi-layered symbolism, and deep connection with religion. Composers of this period, such as J.S. Bach, G.F. Handel, and A. Vivaldi created spiritual works intended to provide musical accompaniment to worship services and deeply influence listeners' religious perceptions. The main genres of Baroque sacred music were masses, motets, cantatas, and passions (Table 1), each with its peculiarities and performed in its respective religious contexts.

Table 1 - The main genres of Baroque sacred music

Genre	Characteristics of the genre	Example
Mass	The Mass is the musical setting of the Catholic liturgy and is divided into five parts: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. These parts are used during worship.	J.S. Bach – Kyrie eleison (Mass in B minor)
Motet	A polyphonic vocal work based on a biblical or other religious text, performed in the context of liturgical services, both Catholic and Protestant.	J.S. Bach – Jesu, meine Freude
Cantata	This piece is a multi-part vocal and instrumental work that consists of arias, recitatives, and choral numbers. The Protestant tradition uses this work in church services.	J.S. Bach – Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 140
Passion	The dedication to the description of the Passion of Christ was performed during Easter services. The performance incorporates biblical text and musical accompaniment to effectively portray the events of the Passion.	J.S. Bach – Matthäus-Passion, BWV 244
Oratorio	A large musical form for chorus, soloists, and orchestra, often based on biblical themes, is called opera. It differs from opera in that it lacks theatrical action and costumes.	G.F. Handel – Messiah, HWV 56
Anthem	A solemn hymn is used during church services and has a religious and patriotic character. This practice is prevalent in both the Protestant and Anglican traditions.	G.F. Handel – Zadok the Priest; J.S. Bach – Nun danket alle Gott
Te Deum	A hymn of thanksgiving is used in Catholic and Anglican services. This hymn is often performed during large festive services or special occasions.	M. Charpentier – Te Deum; G.F. Handel – Te Deum in D major

Source: compiled by the authors based on J. McKean (2022) and H.M. Castro-Revilla (2022).

The Mass was one of the most important genres in the Catholic liturgy (Zhanysbayeva et al., 2021). It included five main parts: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. Baroque composers developed the form of the mass to a monumental scale, as can be seen in J.S. Bach's Kyrie eleison. In this genre, religious text and music were combined to achieve a profound emotional impact on the audience. Masses often use polyphony and complex musical structures to emphasize the majesty and solemnity of liturgical rites (Toktagazin et al., 2016). Motets are another vital genre of sacred music used in both Catholic and Protestant liturgies. Motets were usually polyphonic works based on biblical texts or other religious sources. They were performed as part of worship services or special religious events. Though less structured than masses, motets could be used in different parts of the service. J.S. Bach and other Baroque composers actively created motets marked by complex polyphony and melodic intensity.

Cantatas as a genre were especially widespread in Protestant Germany, where they served as musical sermons. The cantata usually included several parts containing arias, recitatives, and chorales. The most famous cantatas by J.S. Bach were written to be performed during liturgical services and intended to emphasize the content of a biblical reading or sermon. In his cantatas, J.S. Bach often used Lutheran chorales, which combined traditional church music with modern musical forms. Passions were one of the most important genres of sacred music, especially during the Easter period. This genre is based on the description of the Passion of Christ, particularly his suffering and death. The most famous is the "Matthäus-Passion" and "Johannes-Passion" by J.S. Bach, which are among the most outstanding examples of passion in musical history (Dirst, 2024). The passions were performed on Good Friday and were intended not only to evoke religious feelings in the audience but also to reveal the tragedy and greatness of the events associated with the crucifixion of Christ.

The use of religious symbolism and liturgical texts in Baroque music was of profound significance and a powerful means of conveying spiritual ideas (Madmarova et al., 2023). Composers of this era actively used biblical texts and liturgical phrases to create deep emotional and spiritual effects. The peculiarity of Baroque music was the combination of religious texts with musical elements that not only emphasized the meaning of the text but also deepened it, adding new levels of meaning. For instance, numerous studies of J.S. Bach's music show that the composer deliberately used musical themes to convey symbolic meanings. For example, in "Matthäus-Passion," numerous musical elements, such as intervals and tonalities, symbolize religious aspects such as suffering and salvation (Jones, 2020). J.S. Bach also used the symbolism of numbers when the repetition of specific musical phrases or motifs could symbolize the Holy Trinity or other theological concepts. Liturgical texts, such as prayers or quotations from the Bible, often served as the basis for spiritual compositions. In the Catholic and Lutheran traditions, the Latin Mass or Protestant chorale texts were used to convey theological meanings through music. Lutheran composers, such as J.S. Bach, integrated Protestant chorales into their cantatas, which helped listeners interact with the music on a deeper spiritual level.

During the Baroque period, the commissioning and performance of sacred music were significantly influenced by a complex system of patronage involving various stakeholders, including church officials, aristocrats, and wealthy individuals. This patronage provided financial support and shaped the creative output of composers like J.S. Bach and G.F. Handel. The Catholic Church was a major patron of music during the Baroque era. It commissioned works for religious ceremonies, enhancing the liturgical experience with elaborate compositions. Composers like G. P. da Palestrina and later J.S. Bach produced significant sacred works under church patronage. Nobles and wealthy individuals often sought to display their social status and cultural refinement through music, leading to the commissioning of works for personal chapels or public performances (Serenade Team, 2024).

The relationship between patrons and composers was often hierarchical but interdependent. Composers relied on patrons for financial stability and career advancement, while patrons sought prestige and entertainment through music (Dyduch et al., 2024). This dynamic fostered innovation and required composers to navigate the expectations of their benefactors. Bach's career illustrates how patronage affected his work. He held various positions that provided stability while allowing him to compose a vast array of sacred music. As Kapellmeister at the court of Köthen, he composed secular works. Still, he later became Cantor at the Thomasschule in Leipzig, where he produced significant sacred compositions such as the St. Matthew Passion and numerous cantatas (Buelow, 1993). His employment allowed him to explore complex theological themes through music while fulfilling the church's liturgical needs. His relationship with church authorities was sometimes strained due to his innovative style and insistence on artistic integrity, occasionally clashing with traditional expectations. Despite this, his position enabled him to create some of his most profound works, reflecting his personal beliefs and the demands of his patrons. Handel's experience with patronage showcases a different trajectory. After moving to England, G.F. Handel became a prominent figure in London's musical life, primarily through his operas and oratorios commissioned by aristocrats. His most famous work, *Messiah*, was initially performed as a charity event, demonstrating how patronage could intersect with civic engagement. Notably, while at Cannons under the Duke of Chandos, G.F. Handel composed several important choral works that laid the groundwork for his later success in oratorio composition (Hammond, 2015). The Duke's financial support allowed G.F. Handel to experiment with new musical forms that would resonate with aristocratic audiences and the emerging middle class.

3.2 Religious aspects in the works of J.S. Bach

J.S. Bach's faith was central to his life and work, profoundly influencing his music. J.S. Bach was a devout Lutheran, reflected in all his religious compositions. He believed that music was a gift

from God and should be used to glorify Him and strengthen faith. J.S. Bach's entire oeuvre is permeated with religious symbolism and biblical imagery, underscoring his spiritual devotion (Lester, 2020). Most of his sacred works, such as cantatas, masses, and passions, were created to be performed during services in Lutheran churches. Significant for understanding his faith are works such as the "Matthäus-Passion," which conveys profound religious experiences through a combination of biblical texts and music. This composition became a kind of musical meditation on the suffering of Christ and reflects the depth of J.S. Bach's spiritual experience. J.S. Bach also extensively used Lutheran chorales in his compositions, which were a liturgical tradition and a way of interacting with believers. Chorales helped listeners understand theological ideas through music, making it more accessible to the public. Thus, J.S. Bach's religious faith was a personal conviction and a defining force that shaped his musical outlook and creativity.

Music ministry in Baroque churches was integral to religious life and deeply connected with church rites. Music served as a means of spiritual communication and uplifting the faithful during liturgical services. In the Lutheran Church, to which J.S. Bach belonged, music played a central role in worship. Especially significant were the pieces that accompanied the main holidays of the Christian calendar, such as Christmas and Easter. J.S. Bach's cantatas, passions, and masses were composed to be performed following religious rites. For instance, his cantatas were usually performed during Sunday liturgies and were tied to the biblical readings of the day. The music complemented the ritual and served as a means of more profound understanding of religious texts. Works such as "Matthäus-Passion" were performed on Good Friday and emphasized the drama and tragedy of the events of the Passion of Christ, creating a strong emotional impact on the congregation (Sola Chagas Lima, 2023).

Liturgical texts set to music were central to connecting the rite and the audience. J.S. Bach and his contemporaries used religious symbols and musical forms to enhance the spiritual significance of

the service, creating a unique atmosphere where music became part of the religious experience. J.S. Bach's spiritual compositions cover a wide range of genres, including masses, motets, and oratorios, each with specific characteristics and serving different liturgical purposes. One of J.S. Bach's greatest spiritual works is the Kyrie Eleison Mass, which summarizes his entire oeuvre. Although the Mass was not intended to be performed in a specific liturgical context, its musical and spiritual content makes it one of the most essential works in the world's musical heritage. Structurally, it corresponds to the traditional parts of the Catholic Mass: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. J.S. Bach used complex polyphony, where each movement contained symbolic musical solutions that emphasized the theological meaning of the text. The Mass in B minor also demonstrates J.S. Bach's mastery of combining different musical styles and techniques, such as cantata and chorale (Wolff, 2020).

J.S. Bach's motets are an example of polyphonic church music performed during liturgies or religious celebrations. The most famous of them are "Jesu, meine Freude" and "Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied" (Vanderlee, 2020). Motets differ from cantatas or oratorios in their relative compactness and polyphony, which gives them an intense spiritual sound. These works were composed for church services and were intended to emphasize the spiritual meaning of biblical texts through complex polyphony. J.S. Bach's oratorios, such as the "Weihnachtsoratorium" and the "Matthäus-Passion," are monumental works performed on important religious holidays. The oratorios combine elements of cantata, opera, and passion. They contain arias, choral parts, and recitatives that retell biblical events, using music to deepen the religious meaning. For instance, in the "Matthäus-Passion," J.S. Bach contrasts dramatic choral scenes and heartfelt arias to convey emotional tension and theological content. The use of biblical texts in the music of J.S. Bach had a profound spiritual and symbolic character. J.S. Bach

chose passages from the Bible not only for their liturgical relevance but also to convey profound theological ideas through music. In his works, the biblical text often became the basis on which complex musical structures that emphasized the symbolism and meaning of the text were created.

One of the most striking examples of J.S. Bach's use of biblical texts is the Matthäus-Passion. Here, the text of the Gospel of Matthew serves as the basis for a musical narrative about the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. J.S. Bach uses direct quotations from the Bible and adds poetic verses that expand and explain the biblical text, enhancing its emotional and spiritual meaning (Table 2). This integration of texts allowed for strong emotional contrasts and deep theological reflections. In other cantatas, J.S. Bach often used passages from the Psalms or the New Testament. These biblical texts coexisted with Protestant chorales, in which listeners could interact directly with the music on a religious level. In works such as "Jesu, meine Freude," biblical quotations merge with poetic texts to form a profoundly religious context emphasizing the connection between music and faith.

Table 2 - The use of biblical texts in the works of J.S. Bach

Work	Biblical source	The role of text in a work
Matthäus-Passion	The Gospel of Matthew	The description of Christ's suffering is the central theme for dramatisation in the passion.
Cantata BWV 140 "Wachet auf"	The Gospel of Matthew, the Parable of the Ten Virgins	It symbolises the Second Coming of Christ, the theme of spiritual readiness.
Motet "Jesu, meine Freude"	Romans 8:1-11	This is text about spiritual rebirth and liberation through Christ.
Cantata BWV 4 "Christ lag in Todes Banden"	1 Corinthians 15:55-57	The victory over death is a glorification of the resurrection of Christ.

Cantata BWV 80 "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott"	Psalm 46, Lutheran Chorale	It symbolises the protection and power of God, based on the Protestant hymn by Martin Luther.
Johannes-Passion	The Gospel of John	This is a description of the suffering and crucifixion of Christ, with an emphasis on the greatness and power of God's will.

Source: compiled by the authors based on J.F. McGrath (2023) and M. Petzoldt (2020).

The symbolism and structure of J.S. Bach's musical works demonstrate his mastery of combining musical forms with deep religious meaning. One of the key features of his work is the use of musical symbolism to convey theological ideas. In J.S. Bach's works, musical elements such as intervals, rhythms, keys, and polyphonic structures often have additional meaning associated with religious symbolism. For instance, the number three is frequently used in J.S. Bach's work to symbolize the Holy Trinity. This can be seen in three-part compositions, the threefold repetition of musical themes, or three-voice polyphony. In his "Kyrie Eleison," numerous three-part forms emphasize the theological content of the work and symbolize the unity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Lohse, 2019). Another essential characteristic is the use of tonal changes to create symbolic contrasts. For example, the transition from minor to major in many of J.S. Bach's works symbolizes the victory of light over darkness or hope after suffering. This is often found in passions and cantatas, where the music reflects a complex emotional and spiritual journey.

The structure of J.S. Bach's works also demonstrates outstanding attention to detail. His motets, masses, and cantatas have clear architectonics, where each section or movement is constructed following strict musical rules, but at the same time, opens up opportunities for emotional expression. For instance, Matthäus-Passion uses a complex multi-part structure that helps convey the tragedy and majesty of the biblical story. The spiritual cantata is an essential genre in the work of J.S. Bach, which served as a musical manifestation of religious faith and was used in the

context of the Lutheran liturgy. In his cantatas, J.S. Bach skilfully combined biblical texts, Lutheran chorales, and poetic elements to convey profound theological ideas. These works served as an aesthetic accompaniment to worship services and helped parishioners understand biblical concepts through music. One of J.S. Bach's most famous sacred cantatas is "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme," BWV 140. It was composed for the last Sunday of the church year and is based on the biblical parable of the Ten Virgins, which symbolizes the expectation of the Second Coming of Christ (van der Leij, 2020). J.S. Bach used biblical texts and Protestant chorales to emphasize the importance of spiritual preparedness and faith. In musical terms, the cantata demonstrates the composer's skill in combining complex polyphony with emotional melody, which aims to awaken the spiritual consciousness of the audience. Another substantial cantata is "Christ lag in Todes Banden," BWV 4, which was performed at Easter and focuses on the theme of the Resurrection. J.S. Bach masterfully uses Lutheran chorales to emphasize Christ's victory over death. The structure of the cantata is based on seven chorale stanzas, where each stanza is musically interpreted through complex polyphony, which enhances the symbolic meaning of the text.

J.S. Bach's cantatas were designed not only to accompany liturgical services but also to promote the spiritual upliftment of the audience. As a profoundly religious man, J.S. Bach considered music a means of communication with God and composed his cantatas to convey theological ideas through harmony and melody. Each cantata was thus a piece of music and a means of preaching faith and strengthening religious feeling. Using biblical quotations and Protestant chorales in J.S. Bach's work was central to his sacred music. The biblical texts in J.S. Bach's works were a basis for conveying theological ideas through music, and the chorales were a means of communication between church tradition and modernity. His works' biblical quotations reflected the key moments of religious events and deepened the spiritual meaning through musical interpretations.

3.3. Religious aspects in the music of J.S. Bach's contemporaries

G.F. Handel, a prominent composer of the Baroque era, devoted much of his work to religion, especially in the oratorio genre. His works "Messiah" and "Israel in Egypt" became essential examples of sacred music, reflecting his skill and deep understanding of religious texts. Composed in 1741, "Messiah" is one of Handel's most famous works (Alonso Amat, 2023). It consists of three parts describing the prophecy of Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection. Handel used biblical texts, including those from Isaiah, the Psalms, the Gospels, and Revelation, to create a majestic musical narrative of salvation. The chorus "Hallelujah" is especially famous; it is the culmination of the work's second part and symbolizes Christ's victory over death. The music emphasizes the solemnity and majesty of biblical content by combining dramatic musical forms with religious ideas. Handel composed a work that conveyed theological concepts and moved the audience with deep emotional content.

"Israel in Egypt," written in 1738, is another famous oratorio based on the biblical story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. G.F. Handel used texts from the book of Exodus and the Psalms to create an epic musical narrative about the ten plagues of the Egyptians and the miraculous rescue of the Israelites through the Red Sea. This work focuses on the power of God and his ability to protect his people. G.F. Handel skillfully used choral polyphony to recreate dramatic events, such as a locust invasion or a sea crossing, creating powerful musical images. These works of G.F. Handel reflect his ability to combine biblical texts with powerful musical forms, creating religious oratorios that have liturgical significance and a profound emotional impact on the audience.

G.F. Handel developed a unique approach to the musical form, especially in the oratorio genre, where his work combined the dramatic nature of opera with religious texts. The specificity of his musical forms lies in the combination of vocal and choral parts with orchestral interludes, which creates large-scale works with a powerful emotional impact. G.F. Handel successfully used

rhythmic and harmonic contrasts to enhance dramatic moments, especially in the choral scenes, where polyphonic textures create a multi-layered musical fabric. G.F. Handel extensively used biblical texts, particularly from the books of Isaiah, the Gospels, and the Psalms. Liturgical texts not only served as the basis for his works but were also skillfully adapted to enhance the emotional and religious content. In "Messiah," the use of Bible passages creates a sense of grandeur and spiritual power, with each episode conveying a religious message through music. The specificity of the form also lies in the use of large choral scenes alternating with arias and recitatives, which allow for a more profound rendering of the textual and musical drama. Choirs enhanced climaxes, like the famous "Hallelujah" chorus from "Messiah," one of the most famous sacred music recordings.

D. Buxtehude, a prominent German composer and organist of the late Baroque period, played a significant role in developing sacred music, primarily through his passions and cantatas. He worked in times when religious music was central in liturgical life, and his work significantly impacted subsequent generations of composers, including the young J.S. Bach. Buxtehude's passions are an essential contribution to the musical world of the time. These works focus on the Passion of Christ and were performed during Easter services. His "*Membra Jesu Nostrae*," a cycle of seven cantatas, is one of his most famous spiritual works (Lemme, 2021). This work was written in 1680 and has a unique structure. Each cantata is dedicated to a different part of the body of the crucified Christ, making it a theological meditation through music. The composer used Latin texts taken from the Bible and medieval liturgical songs, combining them with musical elements that highlighted the tragedy and majesty of Christ's sacrifice. The music in this cycle is soulful and marked by complex polyphony, which emphasizes the depth of religious experience.

Although not as well-known as his organ works, D. Buxtehude's cantatas also significantly impacted the genre's formation in Northern Germany. His cantatas often had a liturgical purpose and

were performed during Sunday services. They are distinguished by polyphony, where each voice performs its musical function, creating a harmonious whole. Buxtehude's cantatas often address the themes of hope and salvation, emphasizing the intimate connection between faith and music. D. Buxtehude's work became a significant link in developing Baroque sacred music. His passions and cantatas combine sophisticated musical technique with deep religious emotion, making his works an example of a musical heritage with historical and spiritual significance. Unlike the Catholic regions, Northern Germany was marked by a close connection between music and theology, which was formed under the influence of M. Luther (McKean, 2022). The Lutheran Church supported the active use of music in services through chorales, which became a central element of worship (Nosenko, 2024). While working in Lubeck, D. Buxtehude composed numerous cantatas and organ works that used Lutheran chorales as their basis. Through these works, listeners could understand theological concepts through music, which enhanced faith and religious experience.

One of the unique religious traditions of Northern Germany was the practice of Abendmusik, evening music concerts in churches that combined music and sermons (Hieb, 2021). D. Buxtehude was central to developing this tradition at the Marienkirche in Lubeck, where he organized musical performances that included sacred and secular works. These concerts became an essential part of the community's religious and cultural life and greatly influenced the young J.S. Bach, who later attended these evenings. The spiritual traditions of Northern Germany also influenced the structure and content of D. Buxtehude's passions. Similarly, to other composers of the region, he turned to the Passion of Christ as the primary theme, using Latin and German biblical texts to create multi-layered spiritual works. These works reflected local religious practices and formed a spiritual context in which music served as a means of deep religious experience. Other prominent Baroque

composers who contributed significantly to the sacred music genre include G.P. Telemann and T. Albinoni. Both composers worked in different regions of Europe, but their music played an essential role in shaping the spiritual musical heritage.

G.P. Telemann was one of the most prolific composers of his time, creating many sacred works performed during worship. His work was distinguished by its versatility, and he composed music for various church rites and celebrations. G.P. Telemann wrote more than 1700 cantatas used in church services and oratorios, masses, and passions. One of his most important spiritual works is the Passion of Christ, written for Easter services (Begbie et al., 2021). G.P. Telemann was known for his ability to combine traditional Lutheran chorales with more modern musical elements, making his music accessible to a broad audience. T. Albinoni, an Italian composer, is better known for his instrumental works. Still, he also composed a significant amount of sacred music, although many of his holy works have disappeared or have not survived. T. Albinoni's most famous sacred work is the Adagio in G minor, performed at funeral services and associated with mourning ceremonies (van Meerbeke, 2021). Although this work is better known in its instrumental version, its emotional depth and melancholic nature testify to the composer's spiritual approach to music.

Both composers, G.P. Telemann, and T. Albinoni, contributed uniquely to the development of Baroque sacred music, although their styles differed. G.P. Telemann focused on combining traditional religious music with new trends, while T. Albinoni introduced more instrumental elements into his sacred music, distinguishing his style from that of other composers of the time.

3.4. The influence of religious heritage on musical culture

Baroque sacred music made a considerable contribution to the formation of the musical culture of subsequent eras, significantly influencing the development of both musical genres and stylistic approaches to composition. One of the key features of Baroque

sacred music was the combination of profound emotional impact with musical forms such as masses, oratorios, cantatas, and passions. This approach to music became the basis for composers of later eras. J.S. Bach and G.F. Handel composed spiritual works that remained popular even after the end of the Baroque era. Their masses, oratorios, and cantatas became models for composers of the classical and romantic periods. J.S. Bach's music experienced a revival in the nineteenth century thanks to the efforts of composers such as F. Mendelssohn, who organized a performance of the "Matthäus-Passion" in 1829. This performance sparked a new interest in J.S. Bach's works and influenced the formation of the musical culture of the Romantic era (Zou, 2023).

In the classical period, composers such as W. A. Mozart and L. van Beethoven drew on Baroque traditions, using complex polyphony and religious themes in their sacred works (Rushton, 2023). Beethoven used polyphonic elements in his "Messe C-dur" and "Messe in Es-dur," demonstrating the influence of J.S. Bach and G.F. Handel on his music. The preservation and development of the religious tradition in classical music were due to composers who drew inspiration from the spiritual genres of the Baroque and medieval church music, integrating them into new musical styles and forms. This process was not simply an imitation of tradition but rather a creative reinterpretation of religious themes in the context of new aesthetic and cultural requirements. In the classical era, especially in the eighteenth century, composers such as J. Haydn, W. A. Mozart, and L. van Beethoven preserved the tradition of sacred music but, at the same time, added new artistic dimensions to it. In his oratorios, such as "The Creation of the World" and "The Seasons," J. Haydn combined the richness of religious content with the emotional depth inherent in his symphonic and chamber works. W. A. Mozart, in turn, created monumental spiritual works such as the "Requiem," which combines dramatic and lyrical elements with religious motifs. Beethoven made a unique contribution to the development of the religious tradition. In his "Messe in C-dur" and "Messe in Es-dur," he combined the complex polyphony of Baroque

composers with the scale of the symphonic form, creating deeply spiritual works that simultaneously reflected the philosophical pursuits of his time. L. van Beethoven expanded the boundaries of sacred music, raising it to aesthetic and moral expression.

In the nineteenth century, religious themes continued to develop in the work of Romantic composers. J. Brahms and A. Bruckner composed spiritual works that retained a connection with past traditions but reflected the individual expression of Romanticism. For instance, J. Brahms's "Ein Deutsches Requiem" uses biblical texts in the context of reflections on life and death, retaining the spiritual core but departing from the traditional Mass (Lott, 2020). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there was a significant renewal of interest in the music of J.S. Bach and his contemporaries due to the general development of musicology, the expansion of the instrumental base for performing Baroque music, and new approaches to its interpretation. One of the key moments in this process was the performance of J.S. Bach's "Matthäus-Passion" under the direction of F. Mendelssohn in 1829 (Fuchs and Jenson, 2023). This performance led to a revival of J.S. Bach's music in Europe and stimulated interest in his sacred works. However, the real renaissance of J.S. Bach's music began in the twentieth century.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, in the wake of growing interest in historical styles and the authenticity of Baroque music performances, new research, and reproduction of music by J.S. Bach and his contemporaries in forms as close as possible to the composers' original intentions have been launched. Conductors such as N. Arnoncourt and G. Leonhardt led the movement for authentic performance, which involved using period instruments and a style characteristic of the Baroque era. This led to the popularisation of the music of J.S. Bach and other composers of the time, such as G.P. Telemann and G.F. Handel, among a wider audience. In the twenty-first century, interest in J.S. Bach's music has only grown thanks to the development of digital technology and the availability of recordings. Performances of his works are

widely broadcast on the Internet and specialized music platforms, making J.S. Bach's music accessible to new generations of listeners. At major music festivals dedicated to Baroque music, the works of J.S. Bach and his contemporaries confirm their outstanding relevance today.

Contemporary performances of Baroque sacred music are marked by an emphasis on the authenticity of performance and a desire to recreate the sound as it could have been heard in the Baroque era (Lewinski et al., 2019). This applies to both the use of historical instruments and the study of vocal and instrumental techniques of the time. Musicians use vintage or replica instruments to recreate the original sound in contemporary performance. Instruments such as Baroque violins, violas da gamba, harpsichords, and organs give Baroque music a distinctive sound that differs significantly from modern orchestras (Schroeder, 2020). In modern Baroque sacred music performances, special attention is paid to the correct understanding of tempos, phrasing, and articulation, which often differs from the romantic style of classical works. Tempos, for example, are usually faster than was customary in the nineteenth century, as Baroque composers sought to convey the lightness and grace of the musical form. In the twenty-first century, technological advances have made it possible to disseminate these works through recordings and digital platforms, making them accessible to a broader audience. At the same time, thanks to the efforts of such ensembles as "The English Concert" and "Collegium Vocale Gent," Baroque sacred music is once again prominent in the world music scene, combining traditional methods with new possibilities.

5. Conclusions

The study determined that religious aspects were central to the formation of Baroque music. The sacred music created by J.S. Bach and his contemporaries vividly manifested the interaction of religious beliefs, theological concepts, and musical forms. In

particular, using biblical texts and symbolism in genres such as cantatas, passions, and masses allowed composers to convey profound spiritual experiences through music. The study confirmed that religious ideas are deeply embedded in the structure of musical compositions, ensuring their emotional and spiritual impact on listeners.

An analysis of J.S. Bach's work has shown that his personal faith and Lutheran traditions were central in shaping his musical compositions. J.S. Bach used Protestant chorales as the main element of his sacred compositions, facilitating their integration into church services and acceptance by the faithful. The study also determined that the composer actively used symbolism and biblical imagery to emphasize the theological content of his works. The study results show that J.S. Bach's music not only reproduced religious texts but also gave them new interpretations through complex polyphonic structures. The works of G.F. Handel, D. Buxtehude, and other Baroque composers who embodied religious ideas and promoted spiritual values through their works are also explored. G.F. Handel, in particular, skilfully combined biblical stories with musical forms in his oratorios, creating works that moved listeners emotionally and spiritually. D. Buxtehude's sacred music and his contribution to the development of the passion genre were also crucial for the musical culture of the time, which confirmed his significant influence on J.S. Bach's later work.

The practical results of the study point to the importance of the authentic performance of Baroque sacred music, which allows for the most accurate reproduction of the sound characteristics of the era. The use of historical instruments and the study of musical techniques of the time contribute to a deeper understanding of musical works and their theological content. This is an important area for contemporary musicology and performance in preserving the spiritual heritage of the Baroque and its transmission to new generations.

The study's limitations are determined by certain aspects of the interpretation of musical works, particularly the difficulty of

accurately recreating the original sound and perception of music in the context of religious rites of the time. As modern performance techniques and instruments differ from those of the Baroque, there is a risk of losing specific nuances that might have been important to composers of the time. Moreover, certain theological aspects can be interpreted differently depending on the context and traditions, which makes it challenging to analyse sacred music from the perspective of modern scientific discourse.

The main direction for further research could be a deeper analysis of religious genres in the context of different confessions, particularly comparing Catholic and Protestant musical traditions in the Baroque period. In addition, the influence of Baroque sacred music on the development of classical and romantic music is worth addressing to reveal its significance in the history of musical art. Further research could also focus on a more detailed analysis of the use of symbolism in composers such as J.S. Bach, G.F. Handel, and D. Buxtehude, allowing for a deeper understanding of the theological underpinnings of their musical heritage.

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All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Yun Gao. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Jiali Xia. All authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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